CONAN

Book of Thoth

and other stories

MARVEL

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CONAN: BOOK OF THOTH #1-4

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CONAN: BOOK OF THOTH #1

The SERPENT SLUMBERS

ALMS FOR THE LESS FORTUNATE?
EH?
GET AWAY FROM ME, YOU FILTHY GUTTERSNIPE!
HH!
PLEASE, KIND SIR -- !
SURELY THE GODS WILL DOUBLY BLESS THE GENEROUS GIVER --
I SAID NO!
BUT--
AWAY!
AND KEEP YOUR FOUL HANDS OFF ME!
NNH!

IF YOU CANNOT WORK, CRIPPLE, THEN I INVITE YOU TO STARVE!
UHHH...

PERHAPS I SHALL.
PERHAPS I SHALL.

BUT THANKS TO YOU, GOOD MERCHANT -- IF I DO --

-- IT WILL NOT BE THIS FINE DAY.

SLOWLY, TENUOUSLY — FOR I SAW HIM WALK THUS OFTEN —
— DID THE CRIPPLED STRIPLING SHUFFLE, DEEP INTO THE DANK ALLEY DISDAINED BY THE LIGHT —
— AND LIKE SO MANY EARLIER TIMES WITHIN THOSE SHELTERING SHADOWS, A SEEMING MIRACLE TRANSPIRED —
HMM. THAT FEELS BETTER. ALL THAT STOOPING AND HOBBLING WILL MAKE ME OLD BEFORE MY TIME.
BUT LET THAT PROVE A LESSON TO YOU, MERCHANT... THINK WITH YOUR PURSE AND NOT YOUR HEART, AND YOU COULD VERY WELL LOSE B --
--UUHHFF!

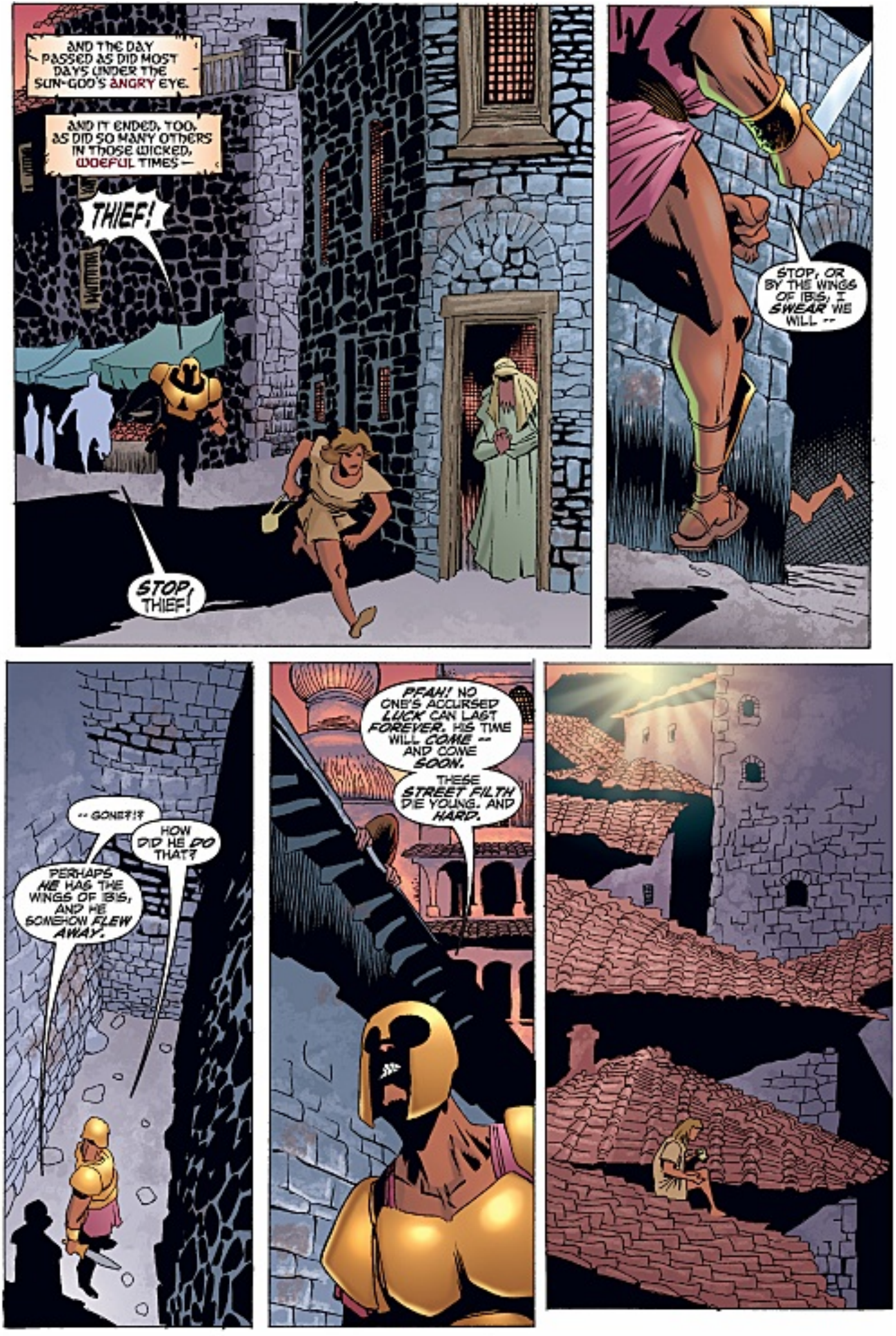
DAYDREAMING AGAIN, THOTH? SUCH CARELESSNESS WILL BE THE DEATH OF YOU!
FATHER! B-BUT I WASN'T--
SILENCE! WHAT HAVE YOU BROUGHT?
NOW, BOY! NOW!
TH-THIS IS ALL I HAVE.
I FEAR PEOPLE HAVE LEARNED TO HOLD THEIR PURSES CLOSE IN THESE LEAN TIMES.
HNH. THEN YOUR FINGERS... SIX... SEVEN... MUST BECOME MORE CLEVER... EIGHT... OR WE'LL HAVE TO TAKE STEPS TO... NINE...
...NINE...
THAT'S ALL?
THAT'S ALL YOU HAVE TO SHOW FOR YOURSELF?
HH!
ONE COULD NOT FEED A LITTER OF RATS WITH THIS PITTANCE! DO YOU NEED AN EYE PUT OUT, TO BE MORE CONVINCING? A LIMB TRULY SHATTERED?
BACK TO THE STREET, BOY! BACK TO WORK!
AND DARE NOT DISAPPOINT ME AGAIN!

SOME DAY, OLD MAN, YOU'LL TAKE THAT QUICK HAND TO ME ONCE TOO OFTEN--
--AND I'LL CHOP IT OFF AT THE WRIST!
FEED ANYONE? HAH! YOU DRINK YOURSELF SENSELESS ON THE BACK OF MY LABOR.

IT IS ONLY FAIR, THEN -- ONLY JUST -- -- THAT I KEEP A SMALL TRIFLE FOR MYSELF.

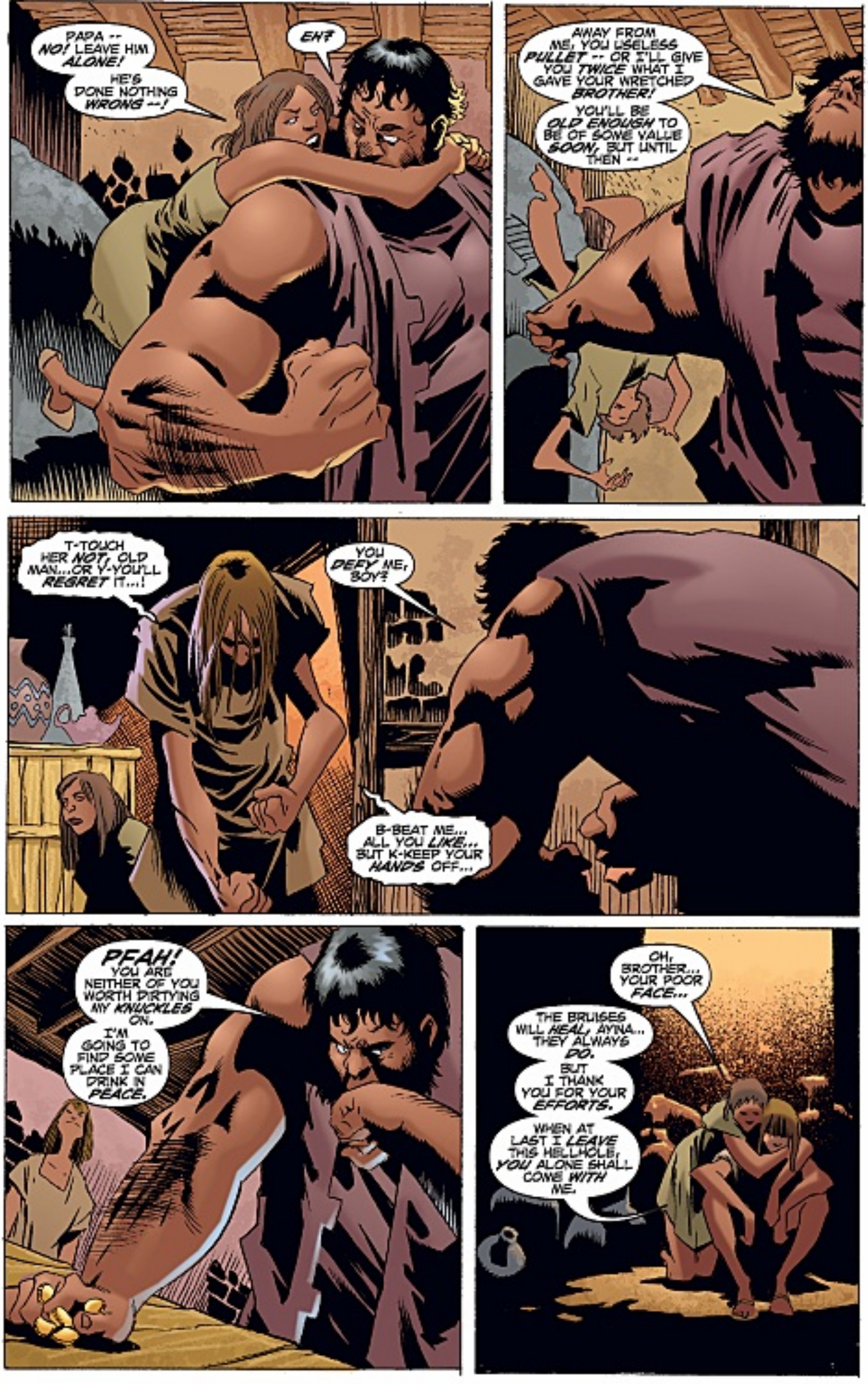
AFTER ALL, I MUST LOOK TO MY OWN FUTURE...
...BLEAK THOUGH IT MIGHT BE.

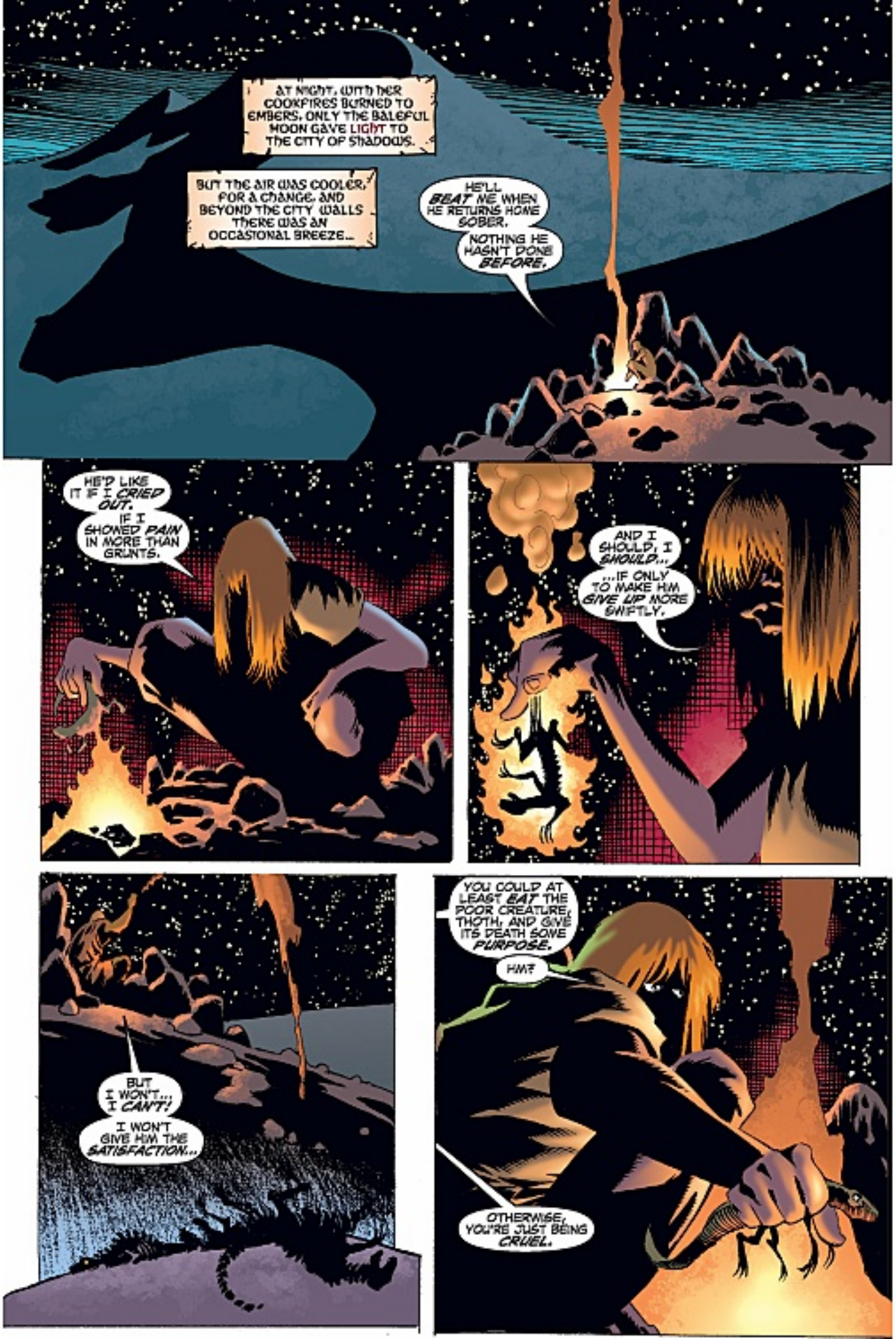
AND ONCE MORE INTO THE DUSTY STREETS HOBBLED THE SLY YOUNG TRICKSTER THOTH.


AND THE DAY PASSED AS DID MOST DAYS UNDER THE SUN-GOD'S ANGRY EYE.
AND IT ENDED, TOO, AS DID SO MANY OTHERS IN THOSE WICKED, WOEFUL TIMES—
THIEF!
STOP, THIEF!
STOP, OR BY THE WINGS OF IBIS, I SWEAR WE WILL --
-- GONE?!?
HOW DID HE DO THAT?
PERHAPS HE HAS THE WINGS OF IBIS, AND HE SOMEHOW FLEW AWAY.
PFAH! NO ONE'S ACCURSED LUCK CAN LAST FOREVER. HIS TIME WILL COME -- AND COME SOON.
THESE STREET FILTH DIE YOUNG. AND HARD.

THE BLOATED SUN, SATED ON THE DAY'S BLOOD AND MISERY, HUNG LOW ON THE HORIZON AS THE YOUNG STYGIAN MADE HIS WARY WAY THROUGH THE DEEPEST SHADOWS OF THE CITY...
...AND ONCE MOMENTARILY FREE OF ITS DISMAL CONFINES...
NNH!
AHH, STILL HERE. WAITING. GROWING.
TWO COINS TODAY, ANOTHER PERHAPS TOMORROW. SEVENTEEN PIASTORS IN ALL THUS FAR.
SOME DAY, WHEN MY TROVE HAS GROWN ENOUGH, IT WILL BUY MY ESCAPE FROM THIS WRETCHED CITY, THIS WRETCHED LIFE.
AYE -- SOME DAY...

SUNSET, THEN. AND TO HOME ONCE MORE.
YET IN TRUTH, THE SAD HOVEL AT MEMPHIA'S EDGE WHERE THOTH WAS BIRTHED WAS NEITHER SHELTER NOR SANCTUARY TO HIM —
— JUST ONE MORE TEMPLE TO FEAR AND PAIN —
I'M HOME, MOTHER.
ABOUT TIME.
WELL? WHAT HAVE YOU BROUGHT NOW?
HERE, FATHER. THE SHINING GAINS OF A HARD DAY'S LABOR.
SO MANY HOURS...
...FOR SUCH A PITTANCE?
DO YOU THINK ME A FOOL, BOY?
YOU WERE WARNED WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU SHIRKED YOUR LABORS!
FATHER, NO -- I -- !
NH!
HH!
GH!
MOTHER -- MAKE HIM STOP! PLEASE, MOTHER! HE'LL KILL THOTH!
HUSH, AMNA -- LEST YOUR FATHER TURN HIS ATTENTION TO US!


PAPA -- NO! LEAVE HIM ALONE!
HE'S DONE NOTHING WRONG --!
EH?
AWAY FROM ME, YOU USELESS PULLET -- OR I'LL GIVE YOU TWICE WHAT I GAVE YOUR WRETCHED BROTHER!
YOU'LL BE OLD ENOUGH TO BE OF SOME VALUE SOON, BUT UNTIL THEN --
T-TOUCH HER NOT, OLD MAN...OR Y-YOU'LL REGRET IT...!
YOU DEFY ME, BOY?
B-BEAT ME... ALL YOU LIKE... BUT K-KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF...
PFAH! YOU ARE NEITHER OF YOU WORTH DIRTYING MY KNUCKLES ON.
I'M GOING TO FIND SOME PLACE I CAN DRINK IN PEACE.
OH, BROTHER... YOUR POOR FACE...
THE BRUISES WILL HEAL, AYNA... THEY ALWAYS DO.
BUT I THANK YOU FOR YOUR EFFORTS.
WHEN AT LAST I LEAVE THIS HELLHOLE, YOU ALONE SHALL COME WITH ME.


AT NIGHT, WITH HER COOKFIRES BURNED TO EMBERS, ONLY THE BALEFUL MOON GAVE LIGHT TO THE CITY OF SHADOWS.
BUT THE AIR WAS COOLER, FOR A CHANGE, AND BEYOND THE CITY WALLS THERE WAS AN OCCASIONAL BREEZE...
HE'LL BEAT ME WHEN HE RETURNS HOME SOBER.
NOTHING HE HASN'T DONE BEFORE.
HE'D LIKE IT IF I CRIED OUT.
IF I SHOWED PAIN IN MORE THAN GRUNTS.
AND I SHOULD, I SHOULD...
...IF ONLY TO MAKE HIM GIVE UP MORE SWIFTLY.
BUT I WON'T... I CAN'T!
I WON'T GIVE HIM THE SATISFACTION...
YOU COULD AT LEAST EAT THE POOR CREATURE, THOTH, AND GIVE ITS DEATH SOME PURPOSE.
HM?
OTHERWISE, YOU'RE JUST BEING CRUEL.

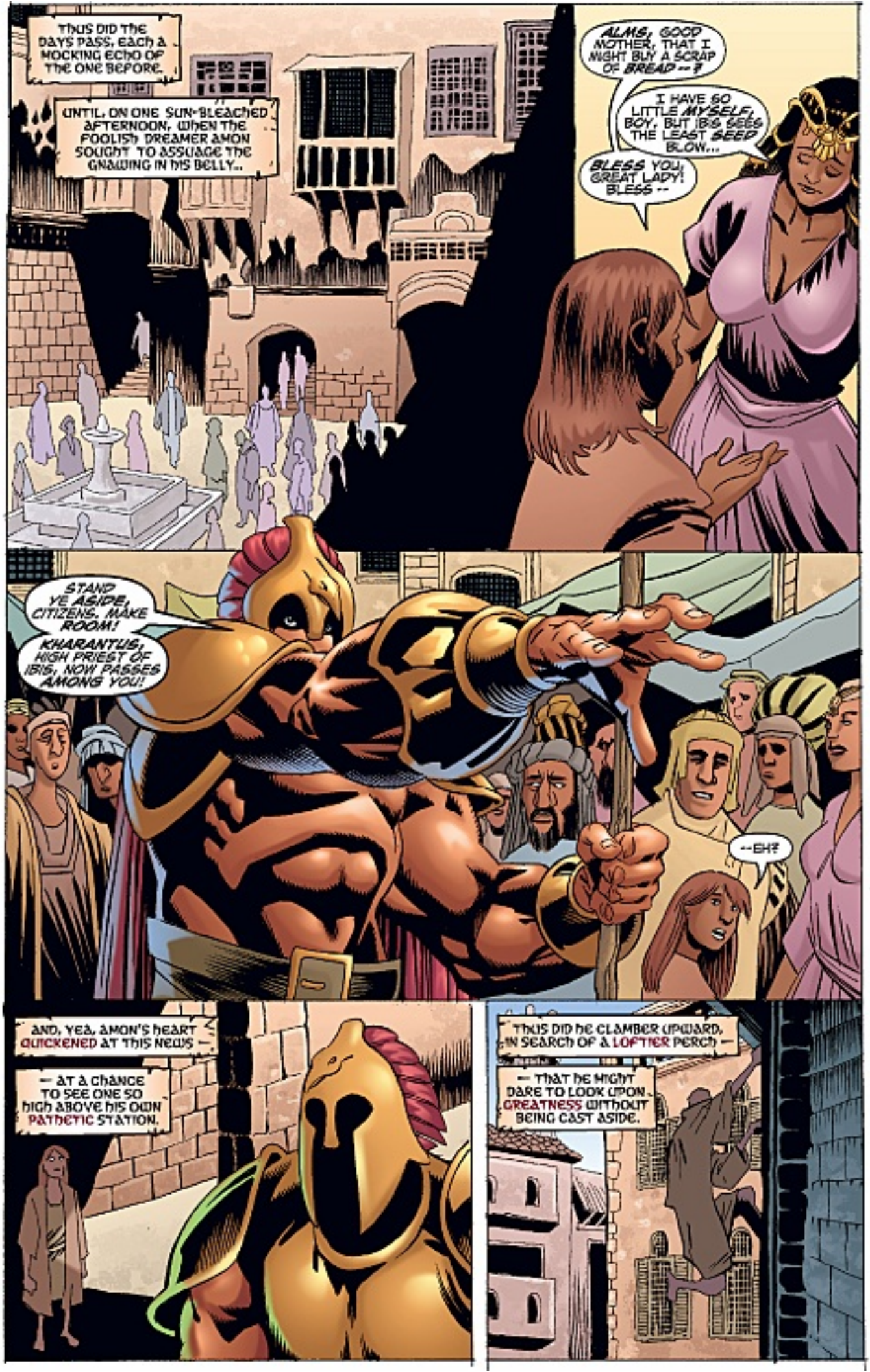
THIS WORLD IS CRUEL, AMON.
HAVE YOU NOT YET LEARNED THAT? HERE, ONE IS EITHER PREDATOR OR PREY.
AND PREDATORS FEAST, WHILE PREY SUFFERS. THE SOONER YOU REALIZE THAT...
...THE EASIER YOUR LOT WILL BE.
I REFUSE TO BELIEVE IT, FRIEND THOTH. THE WORLD IS FILLED WITH MIRACLES. THE GODS SAY --
THE GODS! PFF!
THE GODS OFFER HOPE TO THOSE WHO FOLLOW THEM. FAITHFULLY! THEY DO!
EVEN THOSE OF OUR WOEFUL STATION CAN RISE, SHOULD THE GODS SMILE.
OH? AND YOU THINK THE GODS SMILE ON SUCH AS US? I INVITE YOU TO REMIND ME OF THAT, AMON --
-- WHEN WE ARE BOTH GROWN MEN AND YOU ARE STILL BEGGING IN THE STREETS.
ONE CAN BE A BEGGAR AND STILL BE VIRTUOUS, AND THE GODS --
VIRTUE? AND HOW DOES THAT FEEL, IN AN EMPTY BELLY?

I AM NOT CONTENT TO REMAIN A BEGGAR.
BUT WHAT OTHER CHOICE HAVE YOU?
PREDATOR OR PREY, AMON. PREDATOR OR PREY. THERE EXISTS A GREAT WIDE WORLD OUT THERE, BEYOND OUR CITY'S CRACKED AND SAGGING WALLS.
SOME DAY, THE RIGHT CHANCE WILL PRESENT ITSELF TO ME, THAT CHANCE TO RISE YOU SPEAK SO FONDLY OF --

-- AND WHEN IT DOES, I WILL SEIZE IT BY THE THROAT, NO MATTER WHAT THE COST.

WHEN THAT DAY OCCURS, MY FRIEND -- I PRAY YOU WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.
BUT FOR NOW, I AM TIRED -- AND A HARD PALLET AWAITS MY WEARY HEAD.

I EXPECT I SHALL SEE YOU TOMORROW, THOTH -- OUT ON THE STREETS.
AYE, I EXPECT YOU WILL... FOR NOW.

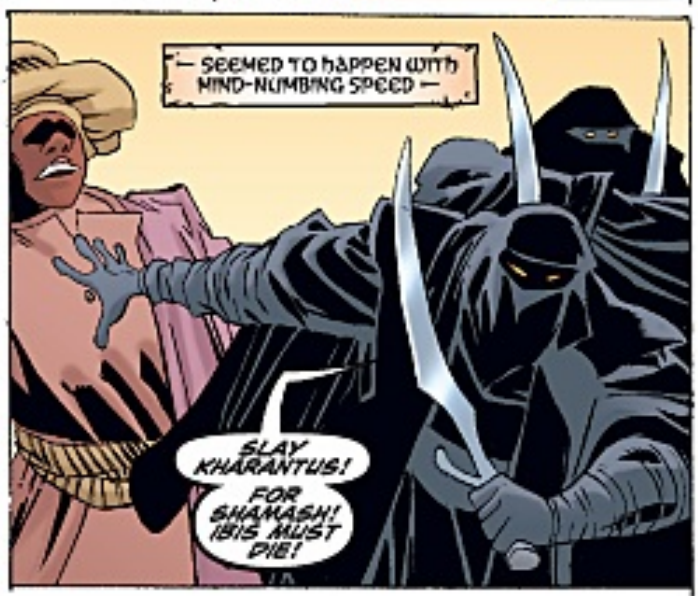

THUS DID THE DAYS PASS, EACH A MOCKING ECHO OF THE ONE BEFORE.
UNTIL, ON ONE SUN-BLEACHED AFTERNOON, WHEN THE FOOLISH DREAMER AMON SOUGHT TO ASSUAGE THE GNAWING IN HIS BELLY..
ALMS, GOOD MOTHER, THAT I MIGHT BUY A SCRAP OF BREAD --?
I HAVE SO LITTLE MYSELF, BOY, BUT IBIS SEES THE LEAST SEED BLOW...
BLESS YOU, GREAT LADY! BLESS --
STAND YE ASIDE, CITIZENS, MAKE ROOM!
KHARANTUS, HIGH PRIEST OF IBIS, NOW PASSES AMONG YOU!
--EH?
AND, YEA, AMON'S HEART QUICKENED AT THIS NEWS --
-- AT A CHANCE TO SEE ONE SO HIGH ABOVE HIS OWN PATHETIC STATION.
THUS DID HE CLAMBER UPWARD, IN SEARCH OF A LOFTIER PERCH --
-- THAT HE MIGHT DARE TO LOOK UPON GREATNESS WITHOUT BEING CAST ASIDE.

AND HE WAS NOT DISAPPOINTED.
THE GLEAMING THRONE. THE RICH ROBES —
THE BENEVOLENT SMILE OF HE WHO BROUGHT THE WISDOM AND GRACE OF THE GREAT GOD IBIS TO THE PEOPLE OF STYGIA —

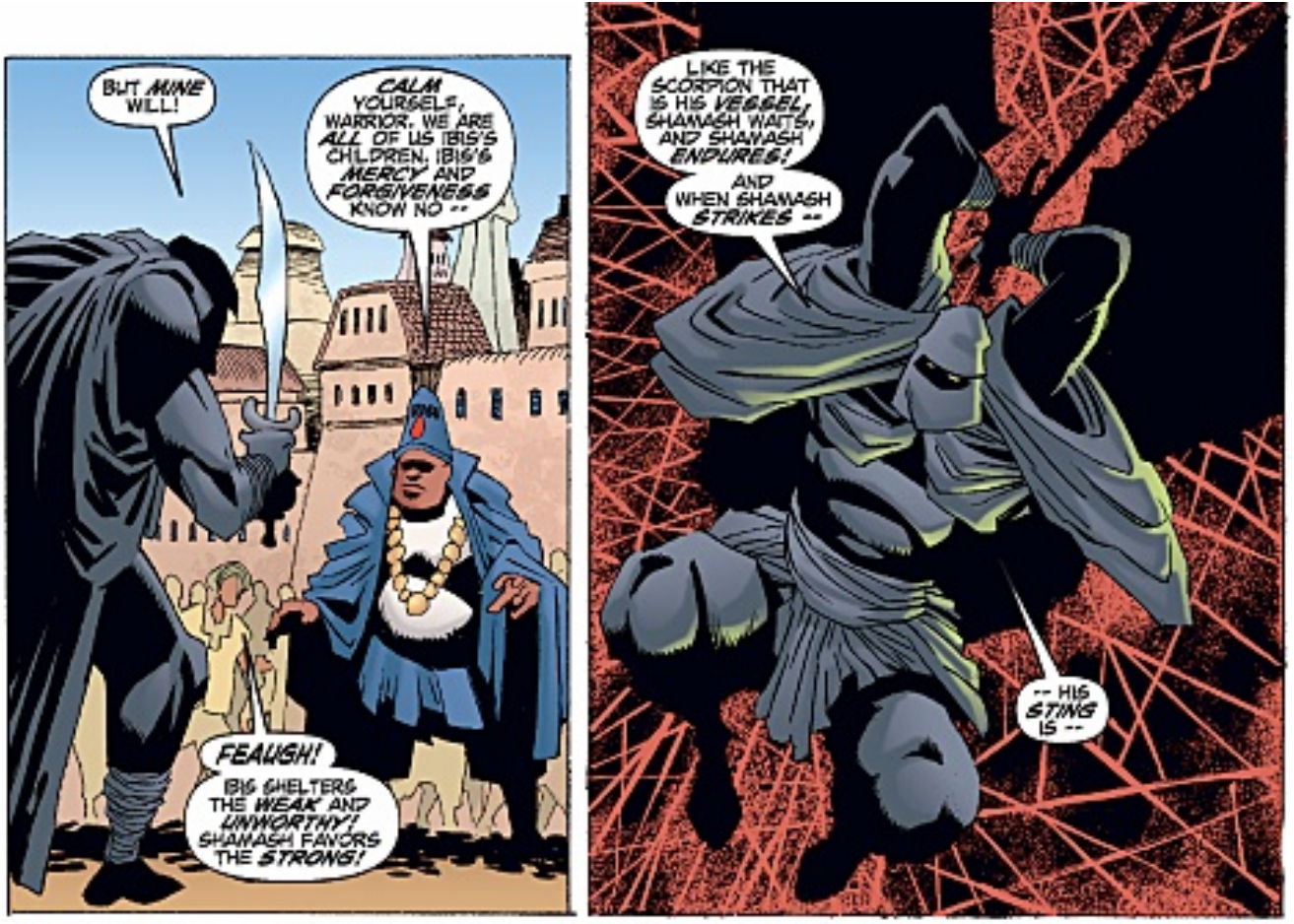
ALL THIS DID AMON SEE — AYE, AND MORE. DARK-CLOAKED DEATH SLIPPING THROUGH THE SHADOWS —
OUTLAWS!
KILLERS -- MEN OF THE SUPPRESSED SCORPION CULT --

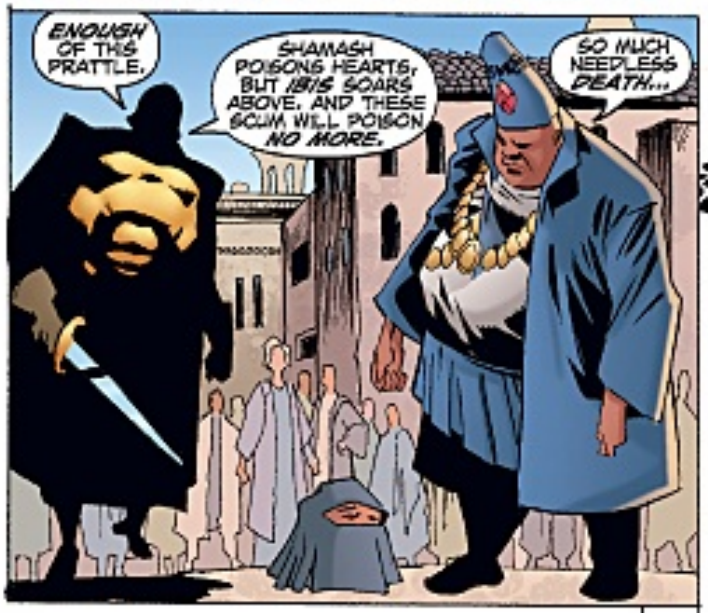
FOR A MOMENT, AMON STOOD IN MUTE HORROR AT THE CARNAGE ABOUT TO TRANSPIRE —
— BUT A MOMENT ONLY —

ASSASSINS!
MEN-AT-ARMS -- BEWARE! ASSASSINS LURK AMONG YOU!
AND WHAT NEXT OCCURRED —


— SEEMED TO HAPPEN WITH MIND-NUMBING SPEED —
SLAY KHARANTUS!
FOR SHAMASH! IBIS MUST DIE!

=HUUK=
STRIKE, MEN OF IBIS! THEY'RE ALL AROUND!
PROTECT THE HIGH PRIEST!
FEAR NOT, CAPTAIN! THE ONLY WAY THEY'LL REACH KHARANTUS IS OVER OUR --
=GAHK=
=GHKK=
THAT WAS A GOOD MAN YOU JUST SLEW, DOG OF SHAMASH!
GO, THEN -- GO AND SERVE HIM IN THE AFTERLIFE!
=NHH=
YOU'LL DIE HERE, FILTH. YOUR BLADE WILL NEVER TOUCH GREAT KHARANTUS.
PERHAPS IT WON'T, BIRD-LOVER...!


BUT MINE WILL!
CALM YOURSELF, WARRIOR. WE ARE ALL OF US ISIS'S CHILDREN. ISIS'S MERCY AND FORGIVENESS KNOW NO --
FEAUSH! ISIS SHELTERS THE WEAK AND UNWORTHY! SHAMASH FAVORS THE STRONG!
LIKE THE SCORPION THAT IS HIS VESSEL, SHAMASH WAITS, AND SHAMASH ENDURES!
AND WHEN SHAMASH STRIKES --
-- HIS STING IS --


ENOUGH OF THIS PRATTLE.
SHAMASH POISONS HEARTS, BUT ISIS SOARS ABOVE. AND THESE SCUM WILL POISON NO MORE.
SO MUCH NEEDLESS DEATH...

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, MASTER?

I AM, AND YOU HAVE MY THANKS.
BUT WE WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST, IF NOT FOR THAT TIMELY WARNING. I MUST KNOW...
WHO AMONG YOU WAS IT WITH THE COURAGE TO CALL OUT?
FORGIVE ME, O GREAT ONE, THOUGH IT IS FORBIDDEN FOR ONE AS LOW AS I TO SPEAK TO GUARDSMEN OR PRIESTS...
...'TWAS I WHO SPOKE.
FORGIVE YOU, LAD? I OWE YOU MY LIFE. THE ROBES AND JEWELS I WEAR BELONG TO IBIS, AND I HAVE LITTLE MYSELF, BUT STILL --
-- ASK A BOON OF ME, AND YOU SHALL HAVE IT.
YOU HONOR ME, MASTER, BUT THE CHANCE TO SERVE IS ALL I CAN ASK.
YOU CALL ME MASTER, EH? THEN PERHAPS I CAN OFFER YOU SOMETHING WORTH MORE THAN GOLD...
...THE CHANCE TO BECOME A TEMPLE ACOLYTE AND TO LEARN AT IBIS'S FEET.
SUCH -- SUCH CHARITY WOULD SURPASS MY GREATEST DREAM, MASTER.
THEN IT IS DONE.
MEET ME AT THE TEMPLE OF IBIS AT THE MID-MORNING HOUR TOMORROW AND WE SHALL BEGIN YOUR EDUCATION.

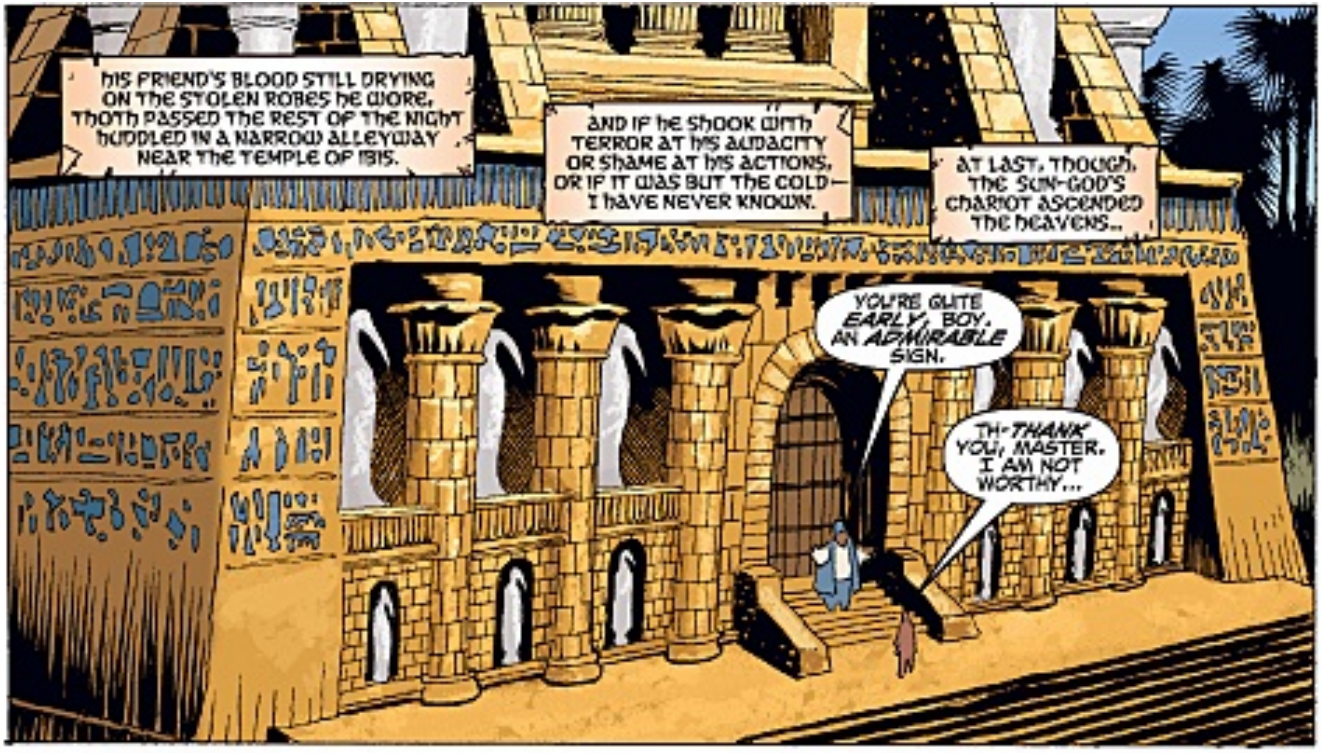
TO GOOD AMON, IT SEEMED HIS JOYOUS SHOUT OF EXULTATION COULD SURELY BE HEARD AS FAR AS THE BORDER OF SHEM —
— BUT WHERE SLY THOTH PROWLED, HE HEARD IT NOT.
WOULD THAT THERE HAD BEEN NOTHING MORE TO HEAR...!
SEE? I TOLD YOU I SAW THAT RUNT HIDE SOMETHING HERE!
NO.
MUST BE AT LEAST EIGHTEEN PIASTORS HERE, I'M THINKING.
OUR FORTUNES ARE MADE!
NO!
NOOOO!
THAT'S MINE, CURSE YOU! MINE! YOU CAN'T HAVE IT!
THEN TAKE IT BACK, RUNT!
I DARE YOU!
UNFF

GIVE ME BACK -- SHUFF? -- WHAT IS MINE -- SHUNH? OR I'LL -- SHUFF? I'LL KILL YOU ALL -- SHUNF?
YOU HAVE SOME GRIT FOR A SCRAWNY RUNT, I'LL GIVE YOU THAT --
-- NOT THAT IT MAKES ANY DIFFERENCE!
SGUNHH?
SNHH?
SUNNHH?
YES. EIGHTEEN PIASTORS EXACTLY. A WEEK'S ROISTERING.
HA HA HAHAHA
THANKS FOR YOUR KIND CONTRIBUTION, RUNT.
YOU CAN KEEP THE JUNK WITH OUR COMPLIMENTS.
BUT IT WAS MINE, DAMN YOU... ALL I HAD... IT WAS MINE...
THOTH? IS THAT YOU?
BREATH OF IBIS, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
AMON? WH-WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
LOOKING FOR YOU.

OH, MY FRIEND, THE MOST WONDROUS THING HAS HAPPENED. TODAY, IN THE CITY SQUARE, I SAVED THE LIFE OF KHARANTUS, HIGH PRIEST OF IBIS.
AND, AS REWARD, HE HAS OFFERED TO MAKE ME AN ACOLYTE.
YOU SEE, THOTH? CHANGE IS POSSIBLE. THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE.
YOU'RE A FOOL, AMON. WE ARE AS DIRT TO THE HIGH AND MIGHTY. BY THIS TIME TOMORROW, THE PRIEST WILL HAVE WIPED YOU FROM HIS MEMORY.
NO, KHARANTUS IS A GOOD MAN, A DECENT MAN.
OH? AND YOU COULD TELL THIS FROM THE GREAT GOLDEN HALO OF LIGHT ABOUT HIS HEAD, I TAKE IT?
ACTUALLY, I...I HAD NOT THE COURAGE TO LOOK ONE SO VIRTUOUS IN THE EYE.
HM? THEN... THE PRIEST NEVER ACTUALLY GOT A GOOD LOOK AT YOU?
Ah, AMON.
TO HIM, I'M CERTAIN ONE BEGGAR BOY LOOKS MUCH THE SAME AS THE NEXT.
INDEED.

FACE FILTHY, DRESSED IN THE PROPER RAGS, ONE BEGGAR BOY MIGHT INDEED LOOK THE SAME AS THE NEXT TO SUCH AS A PRIEST.
TO ALMOST ANYONE, I WOULD THINK.
YOU'RE CERTAIN HE DID NOT SEE YOU WELL?
WHY DO YOU KEEP ASKING THAT?
BELIEVE ME, AMON --
-- IT'S IMPORTANT!
POOR, TRUSTING, FOOLISH AMON.
THROK
UUNNHH!
PERHAPS HAD THINGS NOT GONE SO ILL FOR THOTH THAT DAY, HE WOULD NOT HAVE DONE IT.
AFTER ALL --
-- 'TWOULD BE A SHAME FOR YOU TO HAVE PERISHED FOR NAUGHT.
THUMM
PERHAPS.
BUT LET THIS FINAL THOUGHT COMFORT YOU IN THE AFTERLIFE, MY FRIEND. NOW, THANKS TO YOU, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY MISERABLE LIFE...
...I AM PERMITTING MYSELF TO HOPE.

THOTH HAD SWORN THAT, WHEN THE SLIGHTEST CHANCE PRESENTED ITSELF, HE WOULD SPRING ON IT LIKE A TIGER. AND HE HAD.
NOW, HE WAITED FOR HIS FATHER TO DEPART FOR ANOTHER NIGHT OF DRUNKEN OBLIVION...
AYINA, HUSH. KEEP STILL.
TH-THOTH? WHAT'S WRONG?
FOR ONCE, BEST BELOVED, NOT A THING.
THAT OPPORTUNITY FOR WHICH I'VE SO LONG PRAYED HAS AT LAST OCCURRED.
I HAVE TO GO AWAY -- AND I KNOW NOT WHEN I SHALL SEE YOU AGAIN.
BUT I LEAVE YOU THIS RING AS A TOKEN, SWEET SISTER. MY PLEDGE THAT I SHALL SOME DAY RETURN --
-- TO TAKE YOU AWAY FROM HERE.
UNTIL THEN, AYINA, STAY SAFE IF YOU CAN. STAY STRONG.
FAREWELL, BROTHER. MAY IBIS PROTECT YOU.


HIS FRIEND'S BLOOD STILL DRYING ON THE STOLEN ROBES HE WORE, THOTH PASSED THE REST OF THE NIGHT HUDDLED IN A NARROW ALLEYWAY NEAR THE TEMPLE OF ISIS.
AND IF HE SHOOK WITH TERROR AT HIS AUDACITY OR SHAME AT HIS ACTIONS, OR IF IT WAS BUT THE COLD— I HAVE NEVER KNOWN.
AT LAST, THOUGH, THE SUN-GOD'S CHARIOT ASCENDED THE HEAVENS...
YOU'RE QUITE EARLY, BOY. AN ADMIRABLE SIGN.
TH-THANK YOU, MASTER. I AM NOT WORTHY...

MODESTY BEHOOVES US ALL, YOUNG MAN -- BUT IT CAN BE TAKEN TOO FAR.
LOOK AT ME, LAD. I WANT TO SEE YOUR FACE.
DID HE START, THEN? HAD HIS DESPERATE RUSE -- BEEN SEEN THROUGH? PERHAPS. HE RAISED HIS EYES—

WELL, THE FIRST THING WE MUST DO IS GET YOU CLEANED UP, BOY.
YOUR OWN MOTHER WOULD NEVER RECOGNIZE YOU THROUGH ALL THAT DIRT.

AND, AH, FOOLISH OLD MAN THAT I AM, THERE IS SOMETHING I NEGLECTED TO ASK YOU WHEN FIRST WE MET...
JUST WHAT IS YOUR NAME, BOY?

MY NAME, MASTER?
MY NAME IS... AMON.
AND WITH THAT—

—THE LAD ONCE CALLED THOTH, BUT NOW BECOME AMON, STEPPED INTO A NEW WORLD.
THE ORDER OF THE AZURE CIRCLE OF IBIS IS *OLD*, MY BOY, ITS *ORIGINS* NOW LOST IN THE MISTS OF *ANTIQUITY* --
-- BUT THE *LESSONS* IT TEACHES ARE ETERNAL. YOU'LL HAVE HEARD *SHREDS* OF *IBIS'S WISDOM* IN THE MARKETPLACE, I'M SURE.

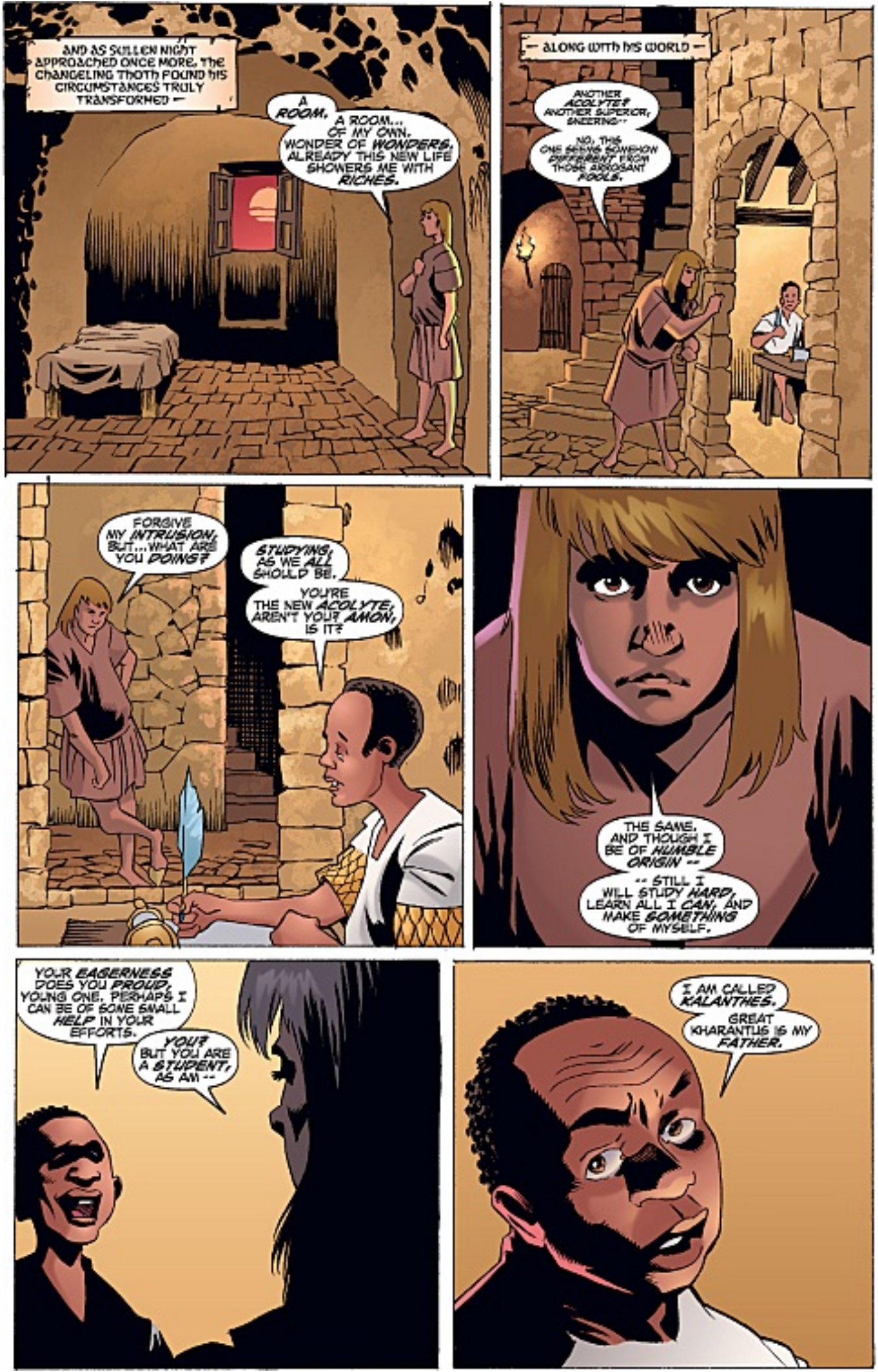
ABOVE ALL ELSE, *IBIS* LEADS US TO WADE THE CURRENTS OF *PEACE*...
...TO LET OUR SPIRITS *SOAR* ON WINDS OF JOY.

YOU WILL LEARN GREAT MAGIC HERE -- BUT ALWAYS, OUR MAGIC IS BORN OF THE *NATURAL ORDER* --
-- AND STRIVES TO ACHIEVE *BALANCE* AND *HARMONY* WITH ALL THINGS.

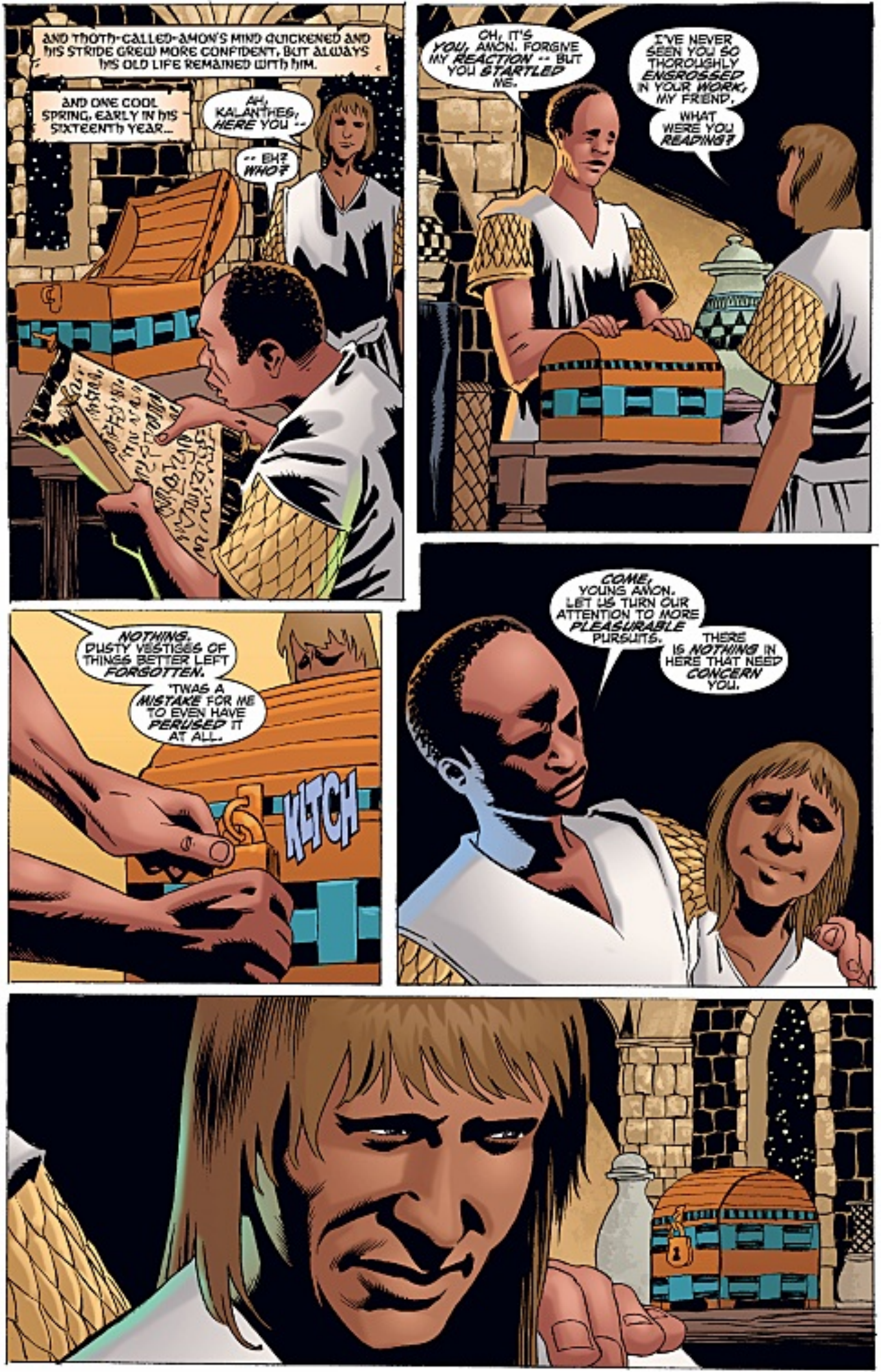
YES, MASTER. I SEE THE...*WISDOM* IN THAT.

EXCELLENT, *EXCELLENT*.
AND *THESE*, AMON, ARE YOUR FELLOW *ACOLYTES*.

GET TO KNOW THEM AND KNOW THEM WELL...
...FOR IN TIME TO COME, THEY SHALL BE AS BROTHERS TO YOU.
REALLY, MASTER, IS OUR FAMILY ALREADY NOT LARGE ENOUGH?
YOU HAVE BARELY TIME TO SEE TO OUR EDUCATION.
DO WE TRULY NEED SUCH A GRUBBY-FEATHERED CHICK UNDERFOOT?
JOKE AS YOU WILL, MY FAITHFUL, BUT WHATEVER YOUR ACCIDENT OF BIRTH, ONCE YOU ALL WERE AS HE.
IN TIME YOU WILL COME TO KNOW HIS VALUE, AND HE YOURS.
FOR THE GLORY OF IBIS COMES NOT FROM PRIDE. ALL FEET REST IN THE MUD TOGETHER.
AS YOU WISH, MASTER, INDEED SHALL IT BE --
-- BUT I, FOR ONE, DO SERIOUSLY HAVE DOUBTS.
COME, AMON. LET ME SHOW YOU TO YOUR NEW QUARTERS. AND DO NOT LET THE OTHERS' PLAYFUL CHIDING CONCERN YOU. IT WILL SOON PASS.
YES, MASTER, IT WILL. ONE WAY, OR ANOTHER...


AND AS SULLEN NIGHT APPROACHED ONCE MORE, THE CHANGELING THOTH FOUND HIS CIRCUMSTANCES TRULY TRANSFORMED —
A ROOM. A ROOM... OF MY OWN. WONDER OF WONDERS. ALREADY THIS NEW LIFE SHOWERS ME WITH RICHES.
— ALONG WITH HIS WORLD —
ANOTHER ACOLYTE? ANOTHER SUPERIOR, SNEERING?
NO, THIS ONE SEEMS SOMEHOW DIFFERENT FROM THOSE ARROGANT FOOLS.
FORGIVE MY INTRUSION, BUT... WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
STUDYING, AS WE ALL SHOULD BE.
YOU'RE THE NEW ACOLYTE, AREN'T YOU? AMON, IS IT?
THE SAME. AND THOUGH I BE OF HUMBLE ORIGIN —
— STILL I WILL STUDY HARD, LEARN ALL I CAN, AND MAKE SOMETHING OF MYSELF.
YOUR EAGERNESS DOES YOU PROUD, YOUNG ONE. PERHAPS I CAN BE OF SOME SMALL HELP IN YOUR EFFORTS.
YOU? BUT YOU ARE A STUDENT, AS AM —
I AM CALLED KALANTHES.
GREAT KHARANTUS IS MY FATHER.

AND THUS, MOST WISE SCHOLAR, WAS FORGED AN UNLIKELY BOND THAT WOULD IN TIME COMMAND THE COURSE OF BOTH BOYS' LIVES..
...AND THE DAYS PASSED BY LIKE SAND IN THE WIND, DRIFTING INTO MONTHS AND YEARS —
THERE, YOU SEE? "THE PASSAGE OF IBIS'S WINGS BRINGS A CLEANSING BREEZE TO ALL."
— AND YOUNG THOTH PROVED HIMSELF DILIGENT, QUICK OF WIT AND ATTENTIVE —
AND THE CONSTELLATIONS ARE THE WARRIORS OF THE GODS, BATTLING AGAINST THE CREATURES OF THE OUTER DARK...
— TAKING TO LEARNING AS A STARVING MAN TO FOOD —
...AND NOW AND ONLY NOW, THE PONDERED BEETLE SHELL...
YES, YES... I SEE...
— AND IN TIME, AS SURELY AS FLOOD FOLLOWS DROUGHT —
AND SO, YOU SEE. "THE PASSAGE OF IBIS'S WINGS BRINGS A CLEANSING BREEZE TO ALL."


AND THOTH-CALLED-AMON'S MIND QUICKENED AND HIS STRIDE GREW MORE CONFIDENT, BUT ALWAYS HIS OLD LIFE REMAINED WITH HIM.
AND ONE COOL SPRING, EARLY IN HIS SIXTEENTH YEAR...
AH, KALANTHES, HERE YOU --
-- EH? WHO?
OH, IT'S YOU, AMON. FORGIVE MY REACTION -- BUT YOU STARTLED ME.
I'VE NEVER SEEN YOU SO THOROUGHLY ENGROSSED IN YOUR WORK, MY FRIEND,
WHAT WERE YOU READING?
NOTHING. DUSTY VESTIGES OF THINGS BETTER LEFT FORGOTTEN.
'TWAS A MISTAKE FOR ME TO EVEN HAVE PERUSED IT AT ALL.
KLTCH
COME, YOUNG AMON. LET US TURN OUR ATTENTION TO MORE PLEASURABLE PURSUITS.
THERE IS NOTHING IN HERE THAT NEED CONCERN YOU.

YET, LO —
— AS NIGHT'S CLOAK WRAPPED TIGHT ABOUT THE CITY —
THERE IS NOTHING THAT MORE INTERESTS ME THAN THAT WHICH I SHOULD NOT SEE.
THUS, IF DEAR, TRUSTING KALANTHES WILL FORGIVE HIS YOUNG FRIEND AMON FOR UTILIZING THE TOOLS OF STREET-THIEF THOTH'S OLD TRADE...
YOUNG THOTH CAUTIOUSLY STUDIED HIS PILFERED SCROLLS, STRUGGLING TO MAKE SENSE OF THE ANCIENT TEXT.
AND ONE WORD DID HE FIND REPEATED AGAIN AND YET AGAIN, UNTIL HE GLEANED AT LAST THE TRUTH OF IT...
ACHERON.
'TWOULD SEEM IT WAS HOME TO A THOUSAND CENTURIES OF BLACK MAGIC AND DIABOLISM -- AN ARCHAIC TRADITION OF EVIL.
AND POWER. POWER ENOUGH TO CRUSH ANY WHO STOOD AGAINST IT!
A SOCIETY SO DARK AND DEMONIC, ITS NAME IS NO LONGER PERMITTED TO BE SPOKEN... EVEN IN THE FAINTEST WHISPER.
THIS, THEN, IS WHAT I CAME HERE FOR -- THAT FOR WHICH I HAVE SO LONG BEEN SEARCHING. A SOURCE OF POWER BEYOND EVEN MY VIVID IMAGINING.
'TIS LONG SINCE TIME FOR WHAT HAS BEEN LOST TO ONCE AGAIN BE FOUND.
'TIS TIME POWER WAS MINE!

AND SPRING BECAME SUMMER, AND SUMMER A DRY AND DUSTY AUTUMN.
AND THOTH SEARCHED EVERY CREVICE AND CRANNY OF SAD MEMPHIS, FOLLOWING ANY TINY HINT OR CLUE, TO FIND WORD OF FORBIDDEN ACHERON—
—AND AT LAST, ON ONE TEARFUL SAND-SWEPT NIGHT—
WHERE IS HE, CURSE HIM?
IF THAT FILTHY CUTPURSE LIED TO ME, I'LL --
NO, THERE!
IT IS HIM! IT MUST BE!
YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT IT HAS TAKEN TO FIND YOU, OLD MAN.
AND YET, I HAVE BEEN HERE ALL ALONG.
QUICKLY NOW, HOW ARE YOU CALLED?
I AM CALLED HE WHO WAITS.
OH? AND WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
YOU.

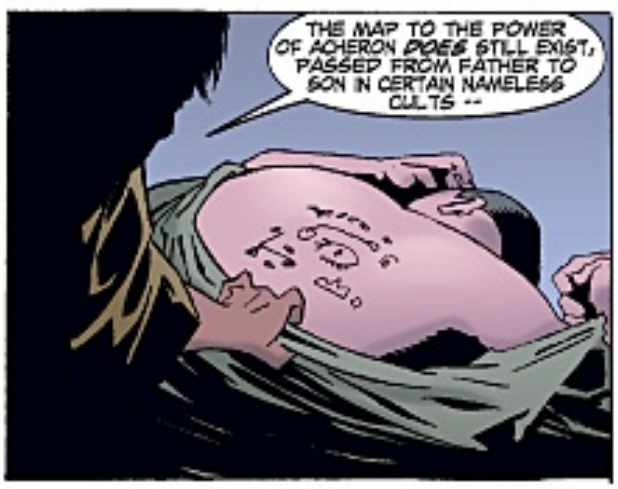
YOU WISH TO LEARN OF ANCIENT ACHERON'S OF ITS POWER? ITS TERRIBLE GLORIES?
WHATEVER THE COST.
THEN SO YOU SHALL.
AARRGGHH!
CURSE YOU! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO M...M...
THAT WHICH YOU DESIRED.
AND THOTH, SENSELESS FROM THE SERPENT'S BITE, FELL INTO A FEVERED SLUMBER, AND MUTTERED, LONG, OFTEN AND LOW, OF WHAT HE DREAMED —
— OF AN ANCIENT KINGDOM THAT ONCE GRIPPED THE WORLD IN ITS RUTHLESS REPTILIAN FIST —
— OF THE GREAT BENIGHTED POWER OF THE LONG LOST SERPENT-GOD SET —
AYE, WRITHING IN AGONY, THE HAPLESS THOTH DREAMED OF ANCIENT ACHERON —

— AND WHEN AT LAST HE AWAKENED, WEAK AND SHAKEN...
I -- I --
TELL ME, OLD MAN, IS WHAT I DREAMED TRUE?
AYE, ALL OF IT -- AND MORE!
AND IT AWAITS ONLY ONE BRAVE ENOUGH!
DEEP IN A CAVERN LONG LOST AND THOUGHT FORGOTTEN, AS GLORIOUS SET HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, THERE LIES A RELIC OF UNIMAGINABLE POWER.
IN ALL THESE LONG CENTURIES, NO ONE HAS HAD THE COURAGE TO SEEK IT OUT...
...TO RETURN ALMIGHTY SET TO HIS PROPER THRONE.
NO? WELL, I SHALL FIND THE RELIC -- I SWEAR IT!
I SHALL FIND THE OBJECT AND RESTORE GLORY TO ANCIENT ACHERON.
AND THAT, BOY, IS WHY I WAITED.
BE TRUE TO YOUR OATH, BOY...UNTO DEATH...
...AND BEYOND...

'TWAS SAID OF SORROW-SHADOWED MEMPHIS MORE THAN MOST THAT ANY WHO CHOSE TO WALK ABROAD AFTER SUNSET RISKED GREAT PERIL IN THE DOING.
AND NEVER WAS THIS MORE TRUE THAN IN THE MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED THOTH'S AUDIENCE WITH HE WHO WAITED.
EH?!
NO! PLEASE, I --

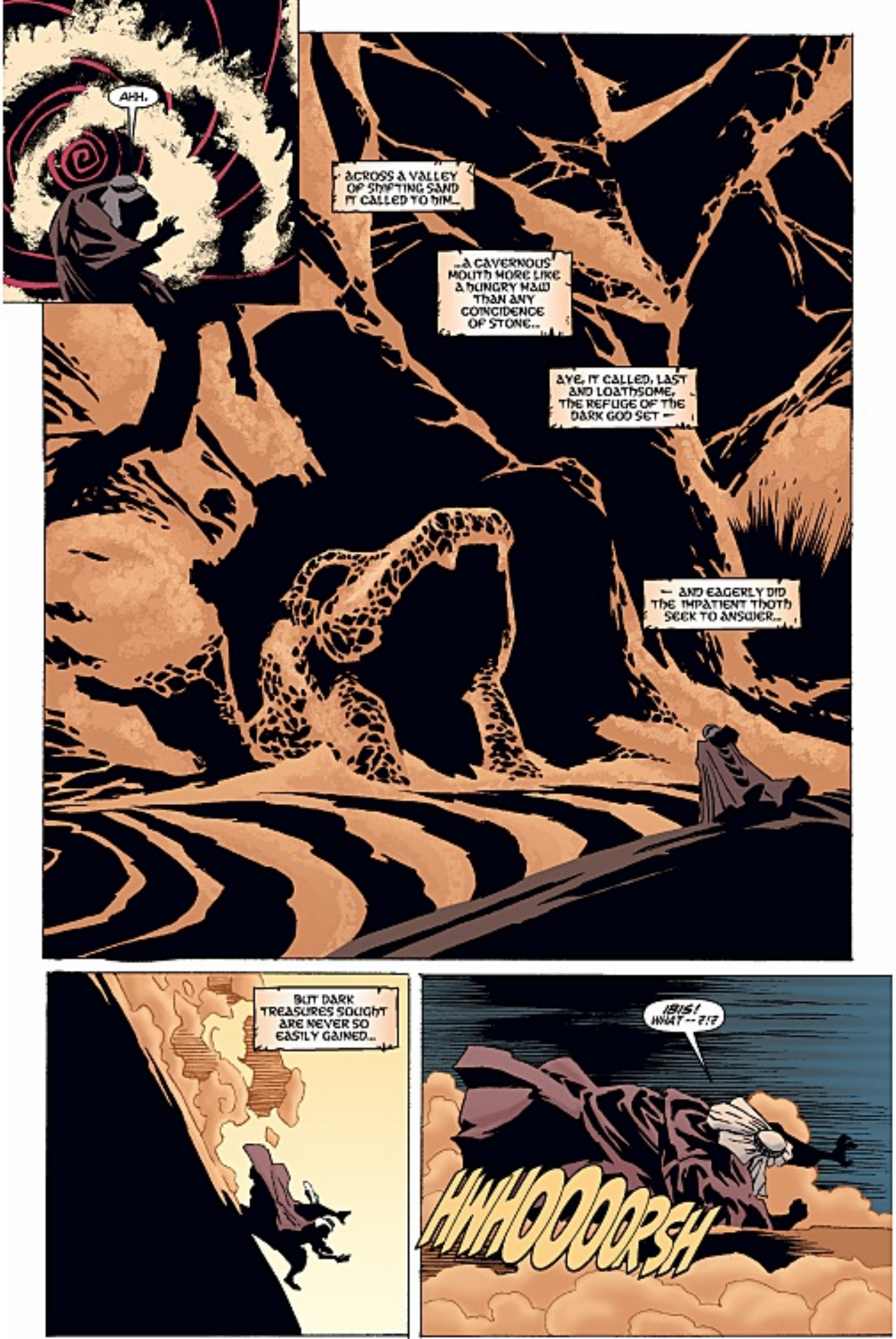
--:GULK:
SHLIK!

NOW TO SEE IF I BLOODIED MY BLADE FOR NAUGHT, OR --
BY SET, THE DREAM SPOKE TRUE!


THE MAP TO THE POWER OF ACHERON DOES STILL EXIST, PASSED FROM FATHER TO SON IN CERTAIN NAMELESS CULTS --

-- AND THE FIRST PART OF THE PUZZLE... IS NOW MINE!

AND AUTUMN BECAME WINTER, SUCH AS MEMPHIA KNEW WINTER. AND SPRING AGAIN, AND SUMMER.
AND MEMPHIA REMARKED LITTLE ON THE DEATHS OF SEVEN SCATTERED MEMBERS OF LONG-DEAD CULTS.
BUT SCARCELY AFTER THE LAST'S DARK-TATTOOED SKIN HAD DRIED —
IF THE MAP IS ACCURATE, THAT WHICH I SEEK CANNOT BE MUCH FURTHER.
THOUGH TRULY, OF WHAT REAL USE IS A MAP IN A LAND WHERE EVERY SAND DUNE LOOKS MUCH THE SAME AS THE --
-- EH?
BY THE SHADOWS OF BLACK-BLESSED ACHERON, NOTHING! BUT IT SHOULD BE -- IT SHOULD --
NO, WAIT.
"And he who comes shall see --
"-- shall see through his heart's blood --"


AHH.
ACROSS A VALLEY OF SHIFTING SAND IT CALLED TO HIM...
...A CAVERNOUS MOUTH MORE LIKE A HUNGRY MAW THAN ANY COINCIDENCE OF STONE...
AYE, IT CALLED, LAST AND LOATHSOME, THE REFUGE OF THE DARK GOD SET —
— AND EAGERLY DID THE IMPATIENT THOTH SEEK TO ANSWER...
BUT DARK TREASURES SOUGHT ARE NEVER SO EASILY GAINED...
IBIS! WHAT -- ?!?
HWHOOOOSH

TURN BACK, FOOL!
THOU ART NOT WORTHY!
PRESS ON AND THOU WILT PERISH!
NO!
THOU HAST BEEN WARNED!
FLEE WHILST THOU ART STILL ABLE!
DEFY US AND DIE!
IF THAT IS MY FATE, SO BE IT!
BUT I'LL NOT BE TURNED AWAY SO EASILY FROM THAT FOR WHICH I'VE SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE SEARCHING --
-- NOT WHEN I'VE COME SO FAR!
AND, SWIFT AS IT BEGAN, THE BLACK WIND DID VANISH...
PFAH! BUT AN ILLUSION -- TO FRIGHTEN AWAY THE WEAK OF WILL!
BUT, ON MY KNEES IF I MUST, WITH MY LAST GASPING BREATH --
-- I SHALL FIND WHAT THIS CAVERN OFFERS!
A STAIRWAY YAWNED BEFORE HIM.

AND DEEP, DEEP, DEEP IT LED—
—UNTIL, MORE THAN A LEAGUE BENEATH THE SMOTHERING EARTH, YOUNG THOTH FOUND HIMSELF FACING HIS DESTINY—
BY ACHERON! THE CHILDREN OF SET!
A WRITHING REPTILIAN TIDE. THEY ROLLED AT HIM, THIS GREAT UNDULATING SEA, SEEKING IN THEIR FANGED FURY TO OVERWHELM HIM, TO CONSUME HIM—
NO!
HSSSSSTT
STOP, I SAY YOU! STAY BACK!
DESTROY ME AND YOU DESTROY ALL HOPE OF YOUR RESURRECTION!
EH? THEY -- HALTED?
BY SET, THESE CREATURES KNOW THEIR MASTER!
AND THOTH SMILED. AND THOTH RELAXED.
KRAKK
AAH!

AND THOTH FELL.

=UUNNHH!!=
C-CAN'T MOVE... B-BONES BROKEN...CH-CHEST... HURTS...
...AND SET'S...SET'S CHILDREN...
AAGGH!
AND HE SCREAMED IN PAIN.
AND HE CURSED HIS FATHER, AND THE OTHER ACOLYTES, AND THE SCAR-FACED BULLY WHO STOLE HIS TREASURE.
AND HE CALLED FOR HIS SISTER, AND FOR AMON.
AND HIS VISION DIMMED, HIS BREATH SOURED, HIS LUNGS BUBBLED WITH BLOOD.
WH-WHY, DARK LORD? WHY DID YOU LEAD ME HERE...
...ONLY TO SLAY ME LIKE A DOG IN THE DARKNESS...?
W-WAIT. THERE...IN THE DARKNESS... COULD IT...COULD IT BE...?
AND THOTH STRETCHED OUT HIS ARM.
AND SO IT WAS. STRAINING, AGONIZED, THAT FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE YOUTH ONCE THOTH NOW AMON...
P-PERHAPS...
...DIED.

CONAN: BOOK OF THOTH #2

MANY MONTHS PASSED, MOST WISE, IN THE BLIGHTED CITY OF MEMPHIA, AT THE EDGE OF THE CRUEL STYGIAN DESERT.
AND PLEASANT MONTHS, THEY WERE NOT.

THE COLD, TWISTING STREETS OF MEMPHIA, ALREADY SHUNNED AFTER DARK BY THE NERVOUS AND THE SANE, RAN RED AGAIN AND AGAIN —
— WITH THE BLOOD OF THOSE WHO BRAVED THEM BY MOONLIGHT.
ONE SUCH WAS A YOUNG MAN, ARISTES BY NAME.

THROUGH HARD YEARS OF STUDY AND EFFORT, HE HAD RISEN TO BECOME PROMINENT AMONG THE ACOLYTES OF THE AZURE CIRCLE OF ISIS.
PLEASE! GO AWAY!
LET ME BE!

BUT THIS NIGHT, THIS TERRIBLE NIGHT, HE WAS DESTINED TO BECOME SOMETHING ELSE—

NO! IT'S BLOCKED!
BUT THIS ALLEY WAS OPEN ONLY A WEEK AGO!
I SWEAR IT WAS!

— A FEAST FOR SERPENTS.
P-P-PLEASE... I HAVE DONE NOTHING TO YOU --!
OH, HAVEN'T YOU, APISTES?
THINK AGAIN.
FROM THE MOMENT I FIRST ENTERED THE TEMPLE OF IBIS, YOU HAVE DONE LITTLE BUT TAUNT AND MOCK ME --
AMON? YOU?!
F-FORGIVE ME! I DID NOT KNOW --!
NAY, NOT AMON. THOUGH 'TIS A ROLE I HAVE PLAYED NOW FOR YEARS.
STILL, 'TIS ONLY RIGHT ONE SHOULD KNOW THE TRUE NAME OF ONE'S EXECUTIONER, I SUPPOSE.
P-P-PLEASE...

MY NAME IS THOTH!
THOTH!
AAAAAAAAA!
the SERPENT STIRS

AND WHEN THE SUN GOD'S RED EYE GAZED DOWNWARD ONCE MORE...
BY IBIS -- SOMETHING SO HORRIBLE --!
WHAT IS IT? LET ME SEE!
TRUST ME, BOY -- THIS IS ONE THING YOU DO NOT WANT TO SEE. YOU WILL CARRY THE SCARS OF IT BURNED INTO YOUR MEMORY FOREVER.
BUT I --
WHA -- ?!?
HAH!
TOO FAST FOR YOU, OLD MAN!
NO ONE TELLS RIDGAR OF WATER STREET WHAT HE CANNOT --
AND THOUGH RIDGAR LIVED THREE-SCORE MORE YEARS, ROSE TO THE POST OF SUB-LORD OF WHARF RECORDS, AND SIRED SEVEN CHILDREN...
...STILL, IN HIS DOTAGE, WOULD HE WAKE UP WEEPING, SCREAMING FOR HIS MOTHER AND CLAWING AT THE AIR.
HE SHOULD NOT HAVE LOOKED.

IT... IT'S MONSTROUS... LIKE NOTHING I'VE EVER SEEN BEFORE.
UNFORTUNATELY, LAD... I CANNOT SAY THE SAME.
WH-WHAT? YOU'VE --
BEFORE YOUR TIME, AMAHT.
BEFORE THE TIME OF MOST UNDER THE SHELTERING WINGS OF ISIS.
THERE WAS A TIME A DEATH LIKE THIS WOULD CAUSE PANIC IN THE STREETS. TODAY, IT WILL MERELY CAUSE MUTTERINGS AMONG GRIZZLED VETERANS AND DOTARDS --
-- MUTTERINGS TOO FEW WILL TAKE SERIOUSLY.
WH-WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
I'M TALKING ABOUT THE LAST TIME BLOOD RAN FREELY IN THE STREETS OF MEMPHIA, IN THE NAME OF A HORROR WE THOUGHT STAMPED OUT AND DEAD.
WE THINK OURSELVES MASTERS OF THE WORLD, BUT WE ARE ONLY PREY.
MARK MY WORDS, LAD. YOU'LL START TO HEAR IT SOON, AND IF YOU'VE FAMILY, YOU'D BEST LEAVE THIS DOOMED CITY.
YOU'LL START TO HEAR THE NAME OF...
SET.

THE CITY GUARD TOLD ALL NOT TO SPEAK OF WHAT THEY HAD SEEN. BUT IF ONE THING IS TRUE IN A CITY, IT IS THAT WHISPERS SPREAD SWIFTLY.
AND SWIFTLY DID THEY WING, REACHING THE VAULTED CORRIDORS OF THE TEMPLE OF IBIS...
I DO NOT WISH TO BELIEVE IT --
-- BUT I FEAR IT MUST BE TRUE.
THAT THE DESICCATED CORPSE FOUND THIS MORNING IN THE STREET WAS INDEED OUR FELLOW ACOLYTE ARISTES?
YES, IT MUST BE.
BUT HOW CAN THEY BE CERTAIN?
I'VE HEARD THE CONDITION IN WHICH THE BODY WAS FOUND MAKES IDENTIFICATION ALL BUT IMPOSSIBLE.
OH, PLEASE...
OF COURSE IT'S ARISTES.
AFTER THE HIDEOUS DEATHS OF THREE OTHERS OF OUR FELLOWS, THE LAST TWO YEARS, WHO ELSE COULD IT BE?
IT IS NOT I, FOR ONE. I CAN ASSURE YOU OF THAT.
WHO -- ?!?
FORGIVE ME, BOON FRIENDS. I DID NOT MEAN TO STARTLE YOU.
'TIS ONLY AMON, COME SEEKING SOME SMALL RESPITE FROM LONG HOURS OF STUDY, WITH HIS BROTHERS IN GREAT IBIS.

PLEASE, GO ON. I DID NOT MEAN TO DISRUPT YOUR CONVERSATION.
WHERE DID WE LEAVE OFF?
WE -- AH -- WE WERE DISCUSSING THE HORRIBLE DEATH OF POOR ARISTES...
AH, YES. WE OF THE AZURE CIRCLE DO INDEED SEEM TO BE MOST ILL-FATED OF LATE.
STILL, I AM CERTAIN GREAT IBIS WILL MAKE ALL EFFORT TO PROTECT HIS DEFENSELESS CHILDREN FROM FURTHER HARM...
...AT LEAST, AS BEST HE CAN.
WELL -- AH -- WE HAD BEST -- UH -- GET BACK TO OUR STUDIES, FRIEND AMON.
MAY IBIS PROTECT YOU, AMON.
MAY IBIS PROTECT US ALL.
INDEED. LET HIM TRY --
-- FOR ALL THE GOOD IT WILL DO.

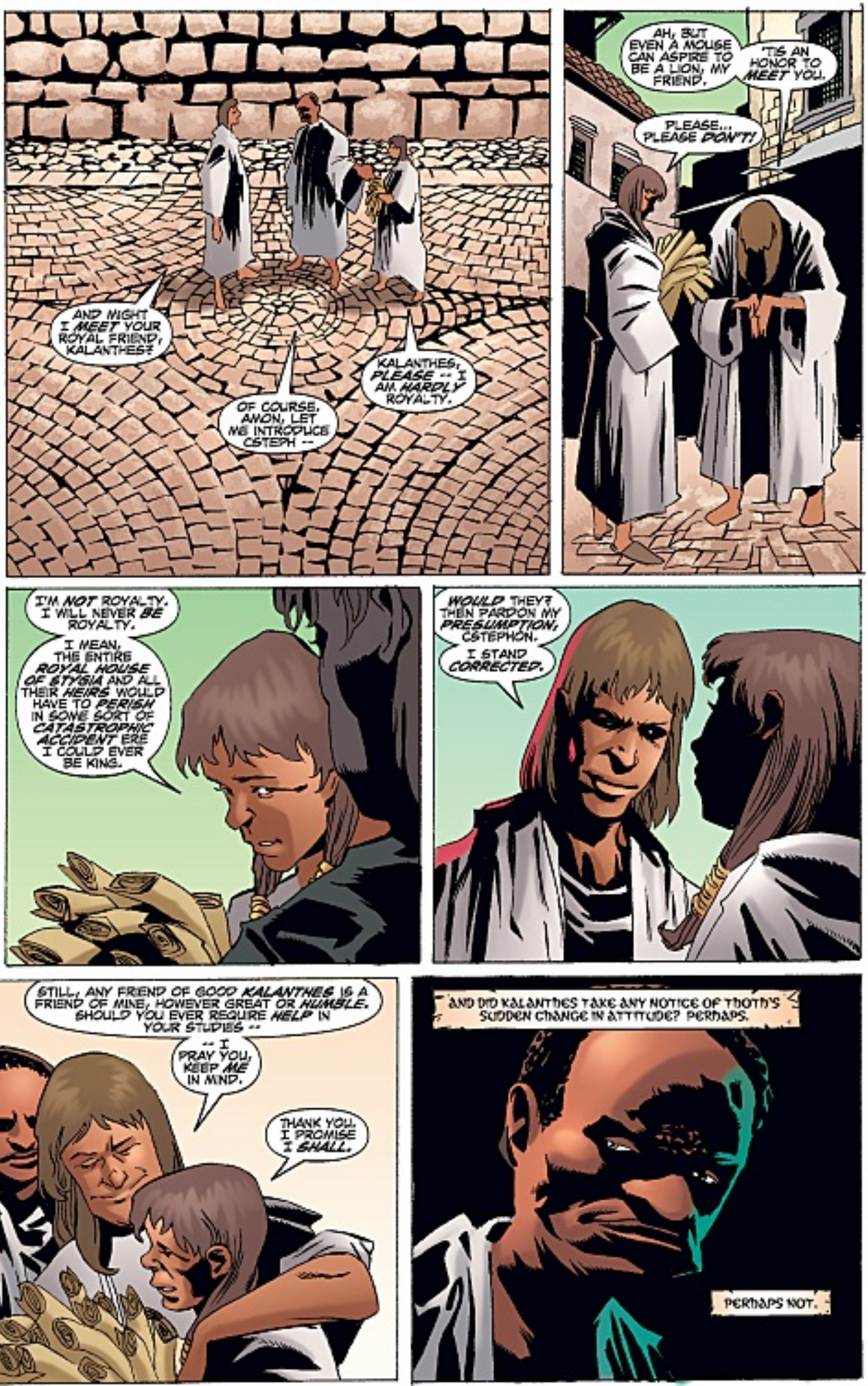
THE YOUNG THOTH GAVE A DRY CHUCKLE, AND BEGAN TO TURN AWAY. BUT...
EXCUSE ME, AMON. DID YOU SAY SOMETHING?
EH?
OH, MASTER KHARANTUS.
NO, MERELY MUTTERING TO MYSELF. A HABIT I REALLY MUST BREAK.
AND HOW ARE YOU, THIS SORROWFUL DAY?
MY SOUL WEIGHS HEAVY WITH THE BURDEN OF POOR ARISTES' DEATH, MY SON --
-- AND YET A PIECE OF MY HEART IS LIGHTENED TO SEE YOU AT LAST GETTING ALONG WELL WITH YOUR FELLOW ACOLYTES.
I OWE IT ALL TO YOU, MASTER.
YOUR WISE TUTELAGE MAKES ALL THINGS POSSIBLE.
DO NOT DENY YOUR OWN GOOD EFFORTS, LAD.
I MERELY FOUND A HARDY SAPLING AND ENCOURAGED IT TO GROW.
IN THAT SMALL CONTRIBUTION ALONE CAN I FIND SOME MEASURE OF COMFORT.
BUT YOU DO SEEM MOST SORELY TROUBLED, MASTER.
ARISTES' DEATH...?

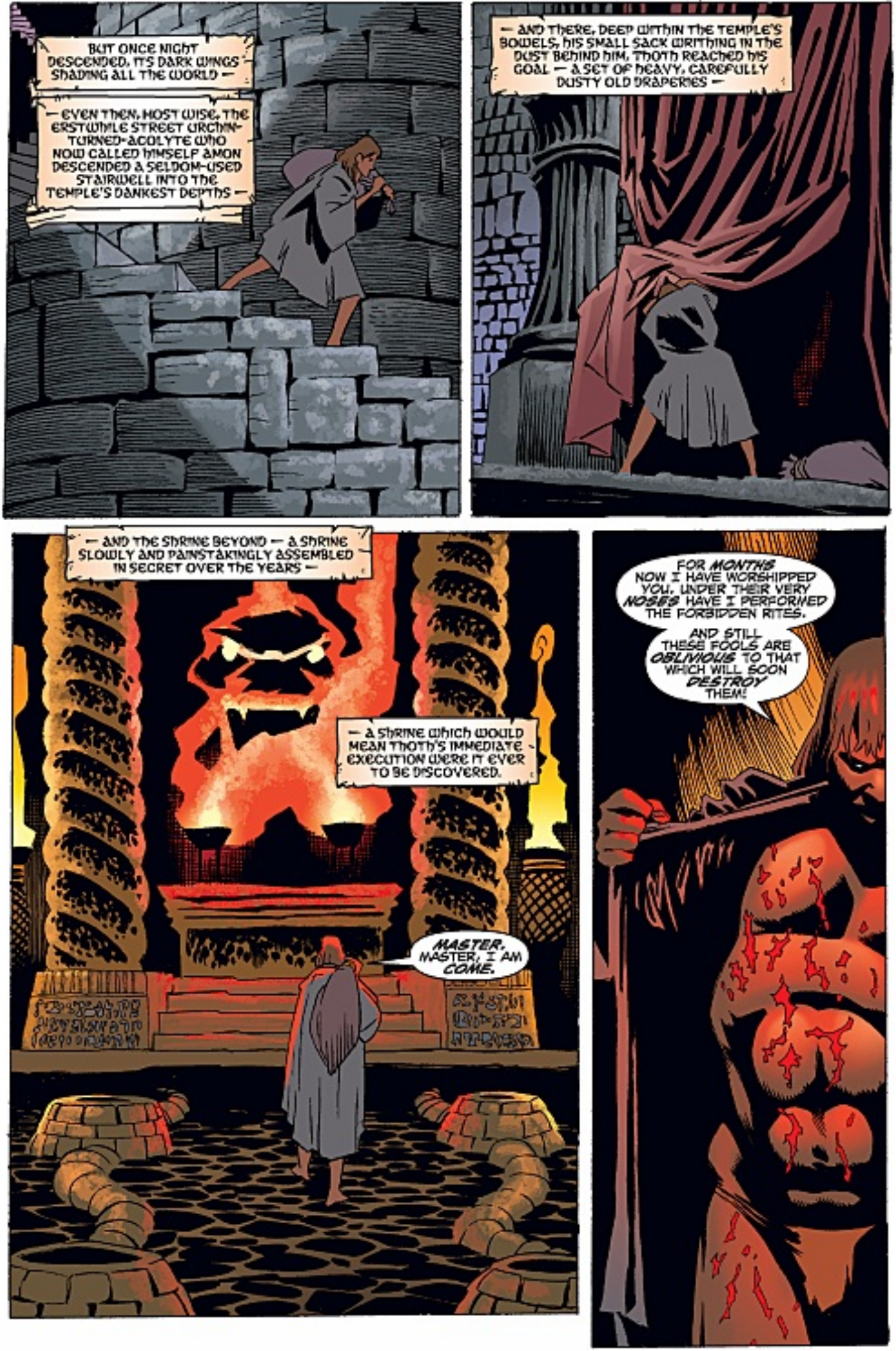
MERELY ONE SMALL PART OF IT.
THE SHADOWS OVER FAIR MEMPHIA LENGTHEN DAILY.
OUR TRADE WITH OTHER CITIES SUFFERS...
...ENEMIES MAKE RUMBLINGS OF WAR...
...IN THE HILLS, THE DANU REBELS GROW BOLDER BY THE DAY...
...AND WORST OF ALL, AFTER SO MANY YEARS OF SLUMBER, AN ANCIENT EVIL APPEARS TO HAVE REARED ITS UGLY HEAD ONCE MORE...
WELL, WHATEVER THE CONCERN, MASTER, I STAND READY TO AID YOU.
NO, MY SON. YOUR OFFER SHOWS YOUR GENEROUS SOUL. BUT THIS IS MY PLIGHT TO REMEDY, NOT YOURS.
YOUR STUDIES ALONE SHOULD CONCERN YOU NOW.
AS YOU WISH, MASTER, SO SHALL IT BE DONE.
AT LEAST...FOR NOW.
AH, THERE I GO, MUTTERING AGAIN.

BUT THOUGH THE CITY GUARD WAS INCREASED, AND LEADERS COUNSELED CALM, THINGS GREW NO BETTER IN SAD MEMPHIS, IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED...
I FEAR YOUR FATHER WAS RIGHT, FRIEND KALANTHES.
THERE SEEMS QUITE A DIFFERENT TONE IN THE MARKETPLACE THESE DAYS.
SADLY SO, AMON. WISE KHARANTUS IS RARELY WRONG.
THE FEAR THAT DOMINATES MEMPHIA THESE DAYS IS AN ALMOST PALPABLE THING.
THINK OF IT -- TWO MORE DEATHS. AND OF YOUNG MEN FROM GOOD FAMILES, AT THAT.
THE PEOPLE SPEAK IN WHISPERS, FEARING THEIR OWN SHADOWS --
-- BUT I WORRY THAT THE DARKNESS LURKS FAR CLOSER THAN ANYONE SUSPECTS.
TRULY, YOU ARE YOUR FATHER'S SON, KALANTHES, I BELIEVE --
AND JUST WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, FOOL?
EH?
I -- AH -- STOPPED TO PARTAKE OF AN ORANGE, GOOD MERCHANT -- AND NOT A PARTICULARLY TASTY ORANGE AT THAT.
A-AS I TOLD YOU --
YES, YES...

YOU LEFT YOUR PURSE AT HOME IN ERROR, YOU SAD!
I -- I DID!
YOU'VE MY WORD I WILL PAY YOU TOMORROW.
YOUR WORD, DOG, BUYS ME NO FRUIT TO SELL TOMORROW, NO ALE TO DRINK TONIGHT.
I REQUIRE CASH IN MY PALM -- NOW!
B-B-BUT --
POOR LAD.
WHAT A SAD, SORRY DISPLAY. WE'LL GET NO SYMPATHY FROM THE MERCHANT -- I KNOW THE TYPE WELL.
I'D FEEL PITY, BUT THE BOY IS SUCH A FOOL --
HE IS NO FOOL, AMON. NAÏVE, PERHAPS, AND UNUSED TO THE WORLD. BUT I KNOW HIM.
HE HAS BEEN TUTORED PRIVATELY ERE NOW -- BUT IS ABOUT TO BEGIN STUDY AT THE TEMPLE.
HIM?
WAIT HERE, MY FRIEND.
I'D BEST SEE TO THIS.

I PRAY YOU FORGIVE MY INTRUSION, GOOD MERCHANT --
-- BUT DO YOU KNOW WHOM YOU CHASTISE HERE?
LET ME GUESS.
A THIEVING CUR?
A WORTHLESS JACKAL?
INDEED? NOT.
THIS IS OSTEPHON, EIGHTEENTH IN LINE OF SUCCESSION TO THE STYGIAN THRONE.
KIND KALANTHES, PLEASE, I WISH YOU WOULDN'T --
AND, IF ONE WERE TO HAVE LOOKED AT THOTH-CALLED-AMON AT THAT PRECISE MOMENT —
— MIGHT ONE HAVE SEEN THE LIGHT OF OPPORTUNITY GROW BRIGHTER IN HIS EYES?
PERHAPS. PERHAPS.
COME, OSTEPHON, IT IS TIME FOR US TO GO.
TWO CASES OF ORANGES TO THE TEMPLE OF ISIS BY THE DINNER HOUR, FRUIT-SELLER.
KEEP ONE ORANGE BACK TO SATISFY THE DEBT.
Y-YESSIR! OF COURSE, SIR!


AND MIGHT I MEET YOUR ROYAL FRIEND, KALANTHES?
OF COURSE, AMON, LET ME INTRODUCE CSTEPH --
KALANTHES, PLEASE -- I AM HARDLY ROYALTY.
AH, BUT EVEN A MOUSE CAN ASPIRE TO BE A LION, MY FRIEND.
'TIS AN HONOR TO MEET YOU.
PLEASE... PLEASE DON'T!
I'M NOT ROYALTY. I WILL NEVER BE ROYALTY.
I MEAN, THE ENTIRE ROYAL HOUSE OF ETYSIA AND ALL THEIR HEIRS WOULD HAVE TO PERISH IN SOME SORT OF CATASTROPHIC ACCIDENT ERE I COULD EVER BE KING.
WOULD THEY? THEN PARDON MY PRESUMPTION, CSTEPHON.
I STAND CORRECTED.
STILL, ANY FRIEND OF GOOD KALANTHES IS A FRIEND OF MINE, HOWEVER GREAT OR HUMBLE. SHOULD YOU EVER REQUIRE HELP IN YOUR STUDIES --
-- I PRAY YOU, KEEP ME IN MIND.
THANK YOU. I PROMISE I SHALL.
AND DID KALANTHES TAKE ANY NOTICE OF THOTH'S SUDDEN CHANGE IN ATTITUDE? PERHAPS.
PERHAPS NOT.


BUT ONCE NIGHT DESCENDED, ITS DARK WINGS SHADING ALL THE WORLD —
— EVEN THEN, MOST WISE, THE ERSTWHILE STREET URCHIN-TURNED-ACOLYTE WHO NOW CALLED HIMSELF AMON DESCENDED A SELDOM-USED STAIRWELL INTO THE TEMPLE'S DANKEST DEPTHS —
— AND THERE, DEEP WITHIN THE TEMPLE'S BOWELS, HIS SMALL SACK WRITHING IN THE DUST BEHIND HIM, THOTH REACHED HIS GOAL — A SET OF HEAVY, CAREFULLY DUSTY OLD DRAPERIES —
— AND THE SHRINE BEYOND — A SHRINE SLOWLY AND PAINSTAKINGLY ASSEMBLED IN SECRET OVER THE YEARS —
— A SHRINE WHICH WOULD MEAN THOTH'S IMMEDIATE EXECUTION WERE IT EVER TO BE DISCOVERED.
MASTER, MASTER, I AM COME.
FOR MONTHS NOW I HAVE WORSHIPPED YOU. UNDER THEIR VERY NOSES HAVE I PERFORMED THE FORBIDDEN RITES.
AND STILL THESE FOOLS ARE OBLIVIOUS TO THAT WHICH WILL SOON DESTROY THEM!

COME, MY LITTLE JACKAL FRIEND.
HAFF HAFF HAFF
'TIS TIME YOU PLAYED YOUR PART IN THE GREAT SPECTACLE BEFORE US.
YPZ
FOR THE GREAT GOD SET IS A RAPACIOUS GOD --
-- AND TO GAIN HIS ATTENTION --
-- SOME SMALL SACRIFICE MUST ALWAYS BE MADE!
SHNKK
NN.

THE CUR'S LIFEBLOOD NOW SPILLING OVER THE ALTAR, THOTH BEGAN TO CHANT —
IEEE ... LAJERAI ... IEEE ACERAI ...
— CALLING UPON FORCES THAT WERE OLD WHEN TIME WAS YOUNG.

AS IF IN RESPONSE TO HIS CALL, A DELUGE OF SCAVENGER BEETLES CAME SKITTERING FROM THE DARKNESS —
— INTENT ON THE ALTAR, AND THE FAST-COOLING FEAST THAT NOW AWAITED THEM.

THEY CAME, THESE TERRIBLE VERMIN-KINGS, IN A ROARING HISS THAT SPOKE OF ANCIENT SEAS LONG DRIED TO SALT —

— BLANKETING THE ALTAR, OVERWHELMING IT —
— AND RISING, RISING —

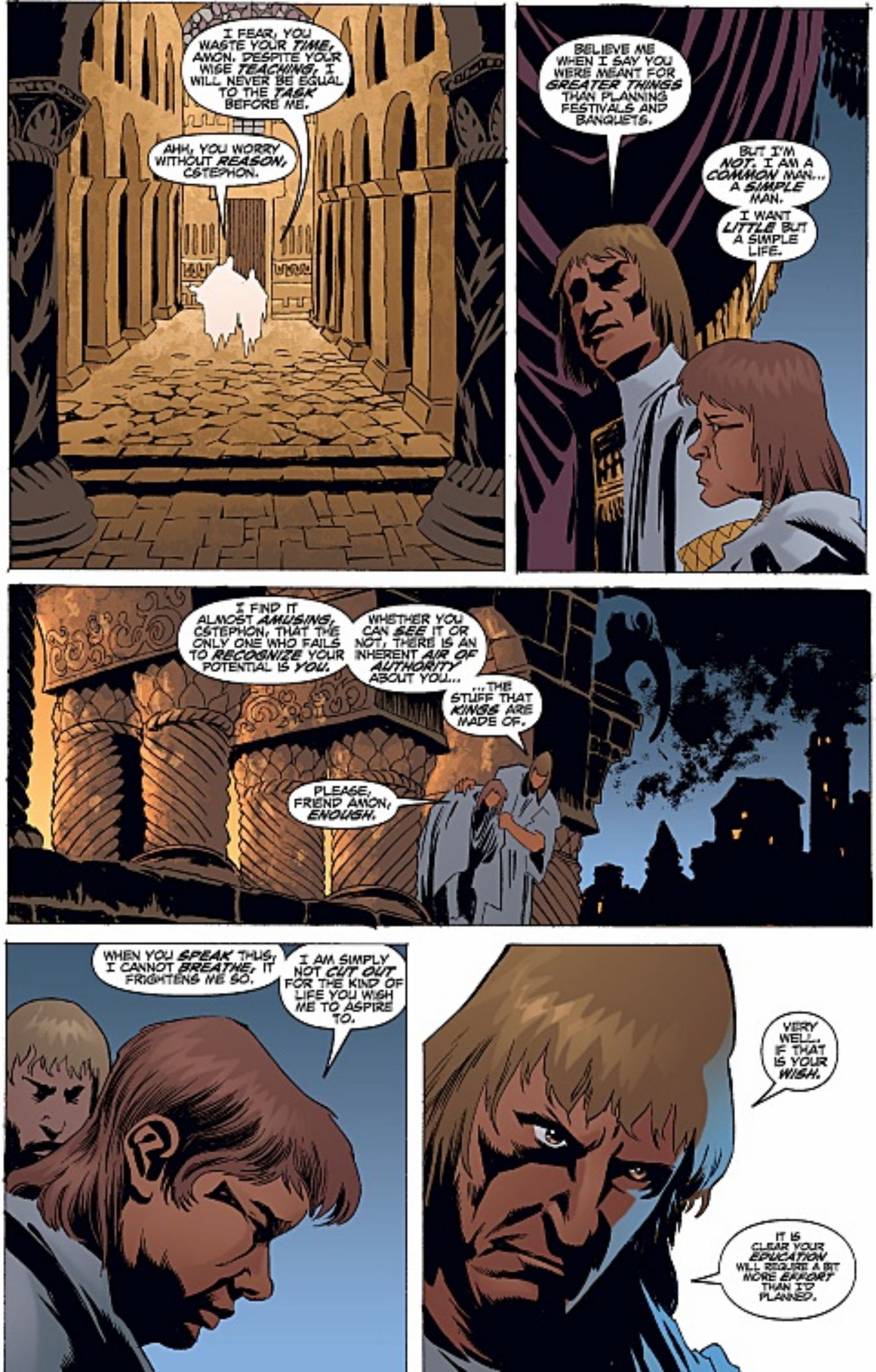
YES!
YES!

SPEAK.
OH, GREAT MASTER...
...AT LONG LAST HAVE I FOUND IT. FOUND WHAT WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR!

AND THE NIGHT'S FELL PLANS LAID, THOTH STOLE UPWARD, HIS HEAD ALIVE WITH DARKNESS AND AMBITION. SEEKING TO SLIP INTO HIS QUARTERS UNOBSERVED.
SEEKING —
— BUT FAILING.
HM?
AMON?!
WHY ARE YOU OUT BEYOND CURFEW, MY SON?
I HAD DIFFICULTY SLEEPING, MASTER.
I THOUGHT PERHAPS A WALK IN THE CHILL NIGHT AIR MIGHT CLEAR MY HEAD.
I KNOW IT IS FORBIDDEN, BUT...
YES, YES... I REMEMBER SUCH NIGHTS MYSELF.
BUT I ALSO SEE A SPOT OF BLOOD ON YOUR GARMENT, MY SON.
HAVE YOU INJURED YOURSELF?
MERELY A SLIGHT SLIP DURING THE RITUAL OF TALON AND PINION TODAY.
I SPEND SO MUCH TIME IN THE LIBRARIES, MY ALTAR WORK GROWS RUSTY.
MM. VERY WELL THEN. I SHALL SEE YOU ON THE MORROW. SLEEP WELL, YOUNG AMON.
THANK YOU, MASTER... I SHALL.

DAYS PASSED, ROLLING ON LIKE RIVERSPAWN RUNNING SEAWARD, AFTER THAT DARK AND OMINOUS NIGHT. AND THOTH PREPARED. AND BIDED... BIDED...
EXCELLENT, CSTEPHON.
AND IF THE EVENSTAR RISES BELOW THE CONSTELLATION SCORPION? HOW ARE THE AUGURIES THEN?
I... I...
GENTLY NOW, GOOD CSTEPHON. THINK IT THROUGH. WE HAVE GONE OVER THIS BEFORE.
A NOBLE WEDDING... IS IT SAFE UNDER THOSE STARS?
IT... IT...
SKRAKT
I DONT KNOW!
I'VE NO CLUE, CURSE MY FLOOD-CHURNED MIND!
I'M AN IDIOT... A DOLT! I SHALL NEVER LEARN!
THAT IS NOT TRUE, MY FRIEND. YOU ARE MUCH TOO HARD ON YOURSELF.
YOU HAVE THE INTELLIGENCE. ALL YOU NEED IS TIME, AND TO RELAX, NOT PUSH YOURSELF SO --
I COMPLETELY CONCUR.
HM?

I SEE OUR FRIEND CSTEPHON STILL HAS A HURDLE OR TWO TO OVERCOME BEFORE HE CAN BEGIN HIS CAREER AS SUB-LORD OF CEREMONIES.
MY FAMILY'S DESIRE FOR ME, SADLY, NOT MY OWN.
STILL, A GOAL THAT CAN BE ACHIEVED.
I'VE NO DOUBT.
BUT PERHAPS THESE ARE LESSONS BEST LEFT FOR TOMORROW, EH?
AMON IS RIGHT -- TOO MUCH PRESSURE CAN BREAK EVEN THE MOST STEADFAST BRANCH.
AND THERE'S A GATHERING TONIGHT, AT --
YOU ARE TRULY MY FRIEND, GOOD KALANTHES, AND I SHALL BE FOREVER IN YOUR DEBT.
BUT I'M SO ADDLED, I FEAR I'D BE POOR COMPANY.
THEN LET US LEAVE GOOD KALANTHES TO PREPARE FOR HIS GATHERING, CSTEPHON.
ALLOW ME TO SEE YOU OUT FOR THE DAY. I'LL BUY YOU AN APRICOT NECTAR IN THE MARKETPLACE.
GLADLY, AMON. YOU ARE TOO KIND.
THINK NOTHING OF IT, MY FRIEND.
AND AT THAT MOMENT, WISE READER, A COLD SHIVER RAN UP KALANTHES' SPINE, THOUGH, IN TRUTH, HE KNEW NOT WHY.
AT LEAST... NOT THEN.

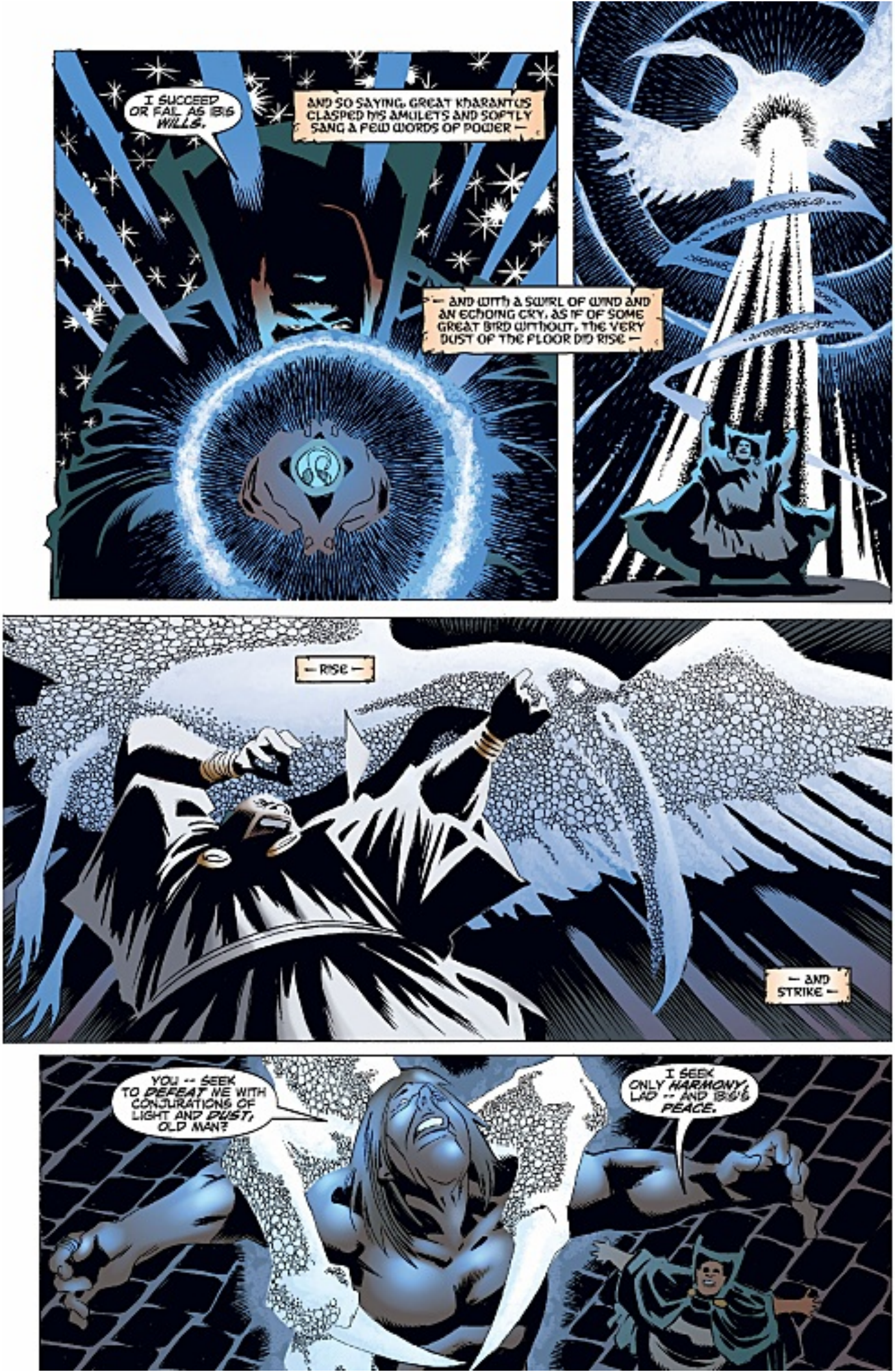

I FEAR, YOU WASTE YOUR TIME, AMON. DESPITE YOUR WISE TEACHING, I WILL NEVER BE EQUAL TO THE TASK BEFORE ME.
AHH, YOU WORRY WITHOUT REASON, CSTEPHON.
BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY YOU WERE MEANT FOR GREATER THINGS THAN PLANNING FESTIVALS AND BANQUETS.
BUT I'M NOT. I AM A COMMON MAN... A SIMPLE MAN.
I WANT LITTLE BUT A SIMPLE LIFE.
I FIND IT ALMOST AMUSING, CSTEPHON, THAT THE ONLY ONE WHO FAILS TO RECOGNIZE YOUR POTENTIAL IS YOU.
WHETHER YOU CAN SEE IT OR NOT, THERE IS AN INHERENT AIR OF AUTHORITY ABOUT YOU...
...THE STUFF THAT KINGS ARE MADE OF.
PLEASE, FRIEND AMON; ENOUGH.
WHEN YOU SPEAK THUS, I CANNOT BREATHE, IT FRIGHTENS ME SO.
I AM SIMPLY NOT CUT OUT FOR THE KIND OF LIFE YOU WISH ME TO ASPIRE TO.
VERY WELL, IF THAT IS YOUR WISH.
IT IS CLEAR YOUR EDUCATION WILL REQUIRE A BIT MORE EFFORT THAN I'D PLANNED.

AND THE RIVER FLOWED. AND THE HEAVENS TURNED.
AND ONE NIGHT, NOT LONG DISTANT, DID THOTH WEND HIS WAY DOWN THAT SAME TWISTING STAIRCASE, HIS ROUGH SACK WRITHING ON HIS SHOULDER..
HNH. I HAVE BEEN *PATIENT* WITH OSTEPHON --
-- BUT THE CHOICE IS NOT *HIS* TO MAKE.
STILL, HE WILL SEE. HE WILL *SEE*.
HE IS NECESSARY TO THE GRAND *SCHEME* TO PUT ALMIGHTY SET UPON HIS *THRONE* ONCE MORE --
-- AND, LIKE IT OR NOT, HE *WILL* PLAY HIS PART IN --
BY IBIS, WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE *YOU*?
EH?

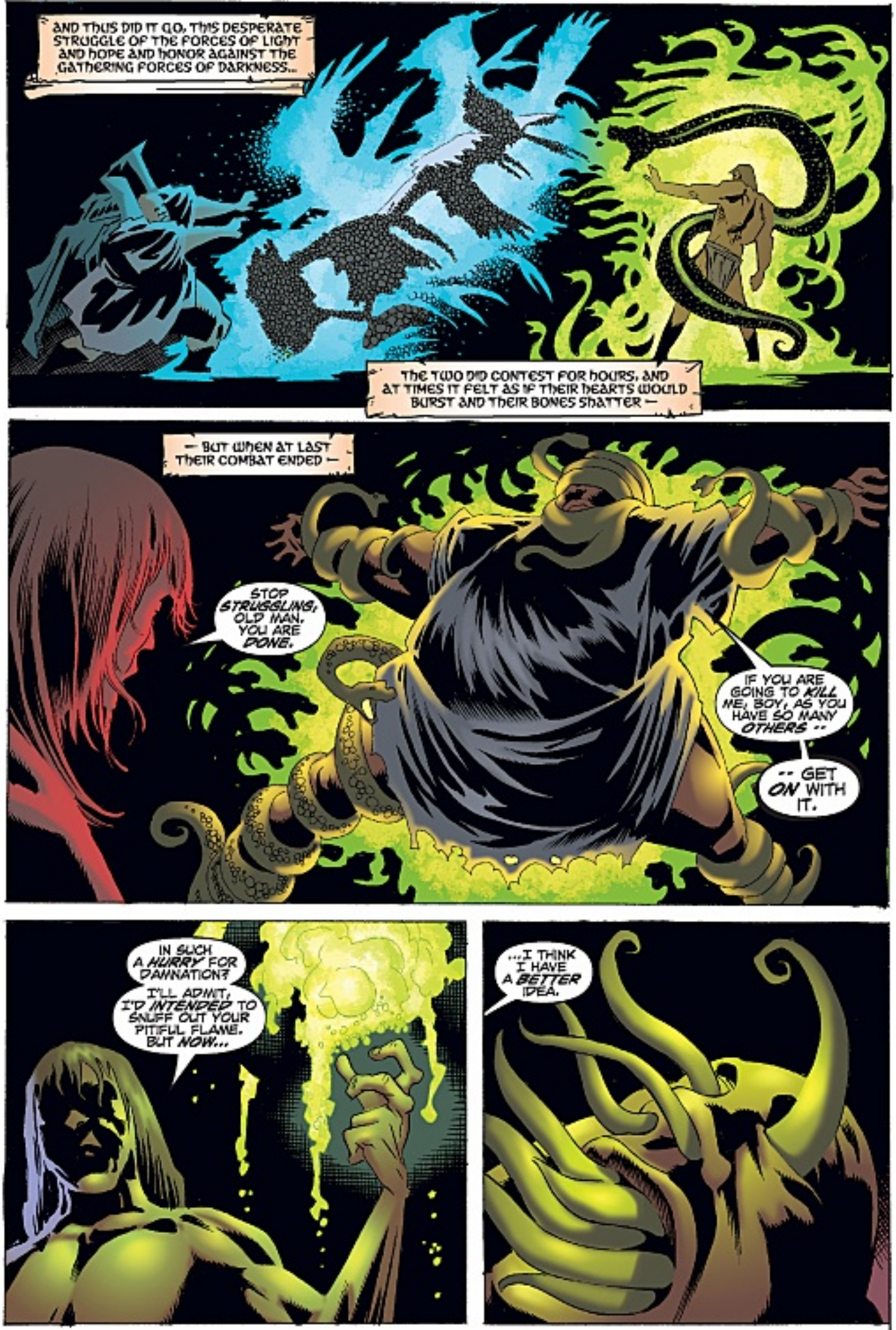
FOR MONTHS NOW, I HAVE SUSPECTED SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITHIN THESE WALLS...
...I FEARED...
GOOD MASTER KHARANTUS, I --
...BUT TO DISCOVER IT WAS YOU...
...YOU WHO ONCE SAVED MY LIFE...
DODDERING OLD DOLT!
YOU'RE AS BLIND AS YOU ARE FOOLISH. IT WAS AMON WHO SAVED YOUR LIFE, NOT I!
WHAT?!
BUT AREN'T YOU -- ?
AS I TOLD ARISTES IN THAT TASTY MOMENT BEFORE I PUT AN END TO HIM --
-- MY NAME, OLD MAN, IS THOTH.

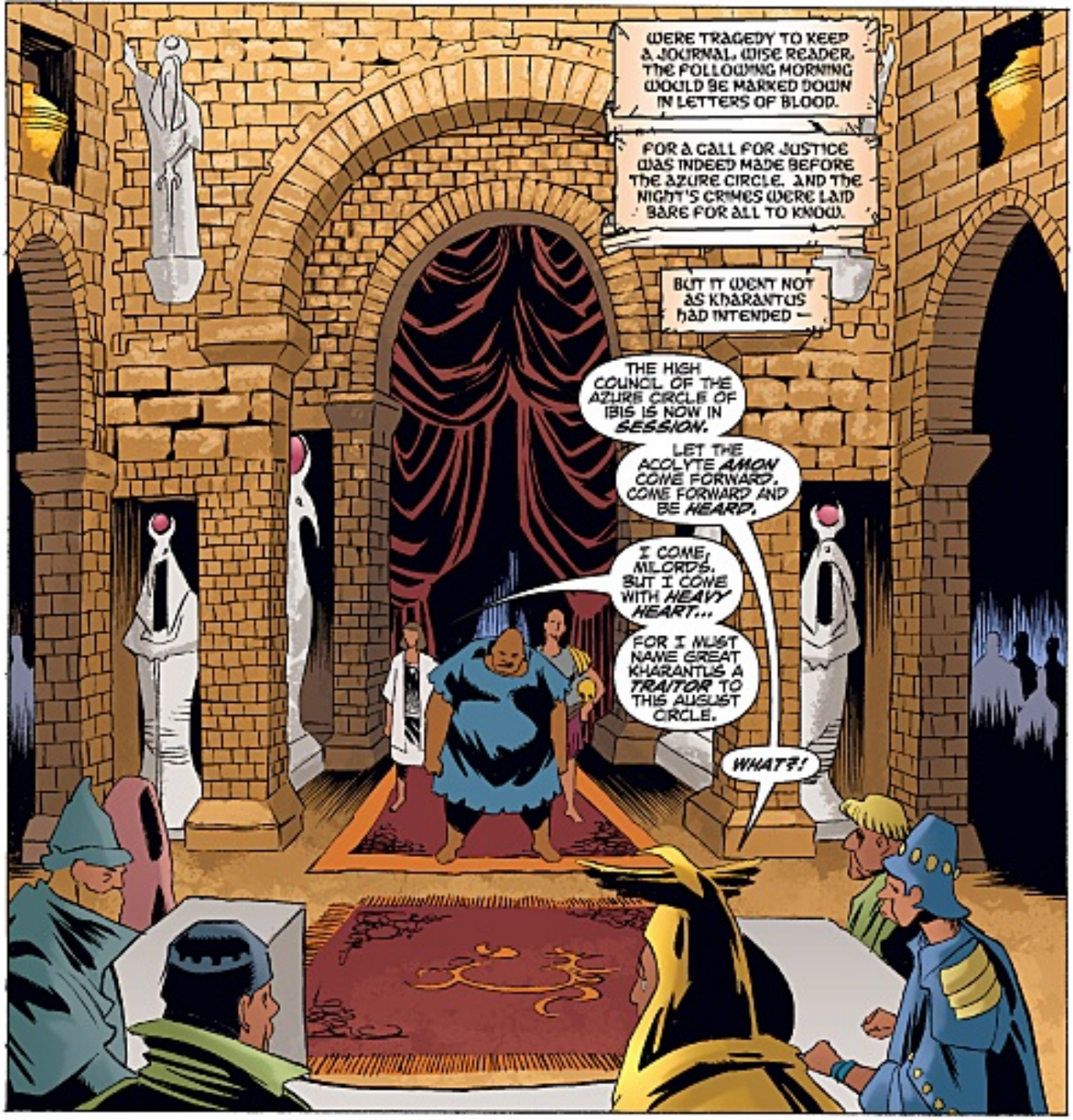
I -- I DO NOT UNDERSTAND --
OF COURSE NOT.
ALL THESE YEARS, YOU NEVER KNEW, NEVER SUSPECTED WHAT A VIPER YOU HAD CLASPED TO YOUR BREAST.
I CAME FROM NOTHING, FROM LESS THAN NOTHING, BUT I HUNGERED --
-- I HUNGERED FOR MORE, FOR KNOWLEDGE, FOR POWER --
-- BUT NOT THE FOOLISH, INEFFECTUAL POWER OF ISIS.
YOU WALK A DANGEROUS PATH, MY SON.
SET IS DARKER, FAR MORE DEADLY THAN YOU COULD EVER KNOW! YOU RISK MORE THAN YOUR LIFE DEALING WITH HIM, BUT YOUR VERY --
OH, I KNOW, OLD MAN. I KNOW MORE THAN YOU COULD HOPE TO IMAGINE.
YOU SEE, I DIED TO GAIN THIS POWER.
I DIED!
IN A CAVERN OLD BEYOND THE TELLING, WITH BLEACHED BONE PIERCING MY CHEST, I PLEADED, BEGGED FOR HELP --

AND IT WAS SET WHO ANSWERED.
WITH MY LAST BREATH, MY FINGERS CLOSED UPON THIS -- THE BLACK RING -- AND IT FOUND ME WORTHY!
IT RESTORED MY LIFE AFTER SET'S CHILDREN HAD SO SAVAGELY BITTEN ME --
-- AND NOW I WALK THIS BENIGHTED WORLD, THEIR POISON FLOWING THROUGH MY VEINS!
SET GRANTS ME POWER, SET GRANTS ME UNHOLY SIGHT, AND WITH HIS RING, I INTEND TO ACHIEVE MY BIRTHRIGHT --
-- AND CLAIM THE LONG-LOST POWER OF ACHERON!
THAT, MY SON, WILL NEVER BE.
YOU THINK TO MASTER ACHERON? OTHERS HAVE THOUGHT SO, AND THEIR SOULS STILL SCREAM IN HELL.
SET HAS NO ALLIES, BOY, ONLY --
AND TRA-LA, TRA-LA, TRA-LA. YOU GABBLE LIKE A BARNYARD FOWL.
YOU FEAR POWER, OLD MAN. DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU CAN STOP ONE WHO HAS EMBRACED IT?
I WAS NOT THREATENING YOU, LAD. I WAS WARNING YOU OF THE PATH YOU TREAD.
EVEN SO, YOU WILL NOT SUCCEED. I WILL TURN YOU OVER TO THE AZURE CIRCLE FOR JUDGMENT.
WILL YOU?


I SUCCEED OR FAIL AS IS MY WILL.
AND SO SAYING, GREAT KHARANTUS CLASPED HIS AMULETS AND SOFTLY SANG A FEW WORDS OF POWER —
— AND WITH A SWIRL OF WIND AND AN ECHOING CRY, AS IF OF SOME GREAT BIRD WITHOUT, THE VERY DUST OF THE FLOOR DID RISE —
— RISE —
— AND STRIKE —
YOU -- SEEK TO DEFEAT ME WITH CONJURATIONS OF LIGHT AND DUST, OLD MAN?
I SEEK ONLY HARMONY, LAD -- AND IS'S PEACE.

YOU TRULY ARE A FOOL.
FOR GREAT SET REVELS IN THE DUST, IN THE DARK, IN ALL THE DEEP, DANK DESOLATE PLACES --
-- AND BY THIS RING I WEAR WHICH BEARS HIS NAME --
-- MERE DUST WILL NEVER BRING ME LOW!
MERE DUST IS NOT ALL I WIELD, YOUNG ONE.
THEN DO YOUR WORST, FAT KHARANTUS.
TOO LONG HAVE I BEEN FORCED TO HIDE MY LIGHT UNDER A BUSHEL.
'TIS TIME AT LAST TO REVEL IN MY DARK POWER!


AND THUS DID IT GO, THIS DESPERATE STRUGGLE OF THE FORCES OF LIGHT AND HOPE AND HONOR AGAINST THE GATHERING FORCES OF DARKNESS...
THE TWO DID CONTEST FOR HOURS, AND AT TIMES IT FELT AS IF THEIR HEARTS WOULD BURST AND THEIR BONES SHATTER —
— BUT WHEN AT LAST THEIR COMBAT ENDED —
STOP STRUGGLING, OLD MAN. YOU ARE DONE.
IF YOU ARE GOING TO KILL ME, BOY, AS YOU HAVE SO MANY OTHERS --
-- GET ON WITH IT.
IN SUCH A HURRY FOR DAMNATION?
I'LL ADMIT, I'D INTENDED TO SNUFF OUT YOUR PITIFUL FLAME. BUT NOW...
...I THINK I HAVE A BETTER IDEA.


WERE TRAGEDY TO KEEP A JOURNAL, WISE READER, THE FOLLOWING MORNING WOULD BE MARKED DOWN IN LETTERS OF BLOOD.
FOR A CALL FOR JUSTICE WAS INDEED MADE BEFORE THE AZURE CIRCLE. AND THE NIGHT'S CRIMES WERE LAID BARE FOR ALL TO KNOW.
BUT IT WENT NOT AS KHARANTUS HAD INTENDED —
THE HIGH COUNCIL OF THE AZURE CIRCLE OF IBIS IS NOW IN SESSION.
LET THE ACOLYTE AMON COME FORWARD. COME FORWARD AND BE HEARD.
I COME, MILORDS. BUT I COME WITH HEAVY HEART...
FOR I MUST NAME GREAT KHARANTUS A TRAITOR TO THIS AUGUST CIRCLE.
WHAT?!

THERE IS A SHRINE, MILORDS, IN THE BOWELS OF THIS TEMPLE. A SHRINE TO DARK SET, WHERE BLOOD SACRIFICE HAS BEEN MADE.
THERE DID I ENCOUNTER KHARANTUS. THERE DID I CONTEST WITH HIM.
THE LAD SPEAKS TRULY, MOST HIGH. MY MEN AND I FOUND THE SHRINE PRECISELY WHERE AMON SAID.
AND THE ACCUSED KNEELING, IN MYSTIC BONDS...
...BUH...
...HH...
...BNUUUUUHHHH...

WHAT IS IT, KHARANTUS? SPEAK UP.
YOUR VERY FATE HANGS IN THE BALANCE, OLD FRIEND. DEFEND YOURSELF.
BUT THE WORDS THE KINDLY PRIEST NEXT SPOKE —
I-IT WAS NOT --
I-I S-STROVE TO --
— SURPRISED NO ONE MORE THAN POOR KHARANTUS HIMSELF.
I...I HAVE NO D-DEFENSE, MOST HIGH. EV-EVERY WORD THE LAD HAS...HAS SPOKEN IS...TRUE.
I W-WORSHIP ALMIGHTY SET! I WORSHIP ALMIGHTY SET, AND I CURSE FOUL IBIS'S NAME!

NO! THIS IS NOT POSSIBLE!
MOST HIGH, I BESEECH YOU! I KNOW NOT WHAT TRANSPIRES HERE -- BUT IT CANNOT BE WHAT IT SEEMS!

YOU KNOW GOOD KHARANTUS. YOU HAVE KNOWN HIM ALL YOUR LIFE.
NO GENTLER, NOBLER, MORE FAITHFUL SERVANT OF IBIS LIVES NOW OR HAS EVER LIVED. THIS IS MADNESS! YOU MUST KNOW IT -- MUST SEE IT!
YOU CANNOT -- CANNOT -- HE IS MY FATHER --

I GRIEVE WITH YOU, KALANTHES -- BUT YOUR FATHER STANDS BY HIS OWN WORDS CONDEMNED. HE MUST FACE PUNISHMENT FOR HIS CRIME.
MEMBERS OF THE CIRCLE...?
AND THE AZURE CIRCLE BEGAN TO CHANT.

AND FOR BUT THE BRIEFEST OF MOMENTS, GOOD KHARANTUS THREW OFF THE SERPENTINE BONDS THAT HELD HIM IN THRALL —
I...
...I...
I AM N-NO *TRAITOR*... NOT T-TO STYGIA...AND N-NOT TO...
BUT SUCH EFFORT WAS MUCH TOO LITTLE —
— AND FAR, FAR TOO LATE.
THE CHANT OF JUDGMENT WAS DONE. AND ITS ECHOES STILL RINGING —
AAARRRGGHH
— THE CIRCLE'S JUSTICE WAS DONE.
I-I DO NOT *BELIEVE* IT...
...KHARANTUS IS STILL *ALIVE*?!

WE ARE NOT BARBARIANS, BOY.
WE HAVE MERELY STOLEN HIS HIGHER SPEECH AND MENTAL FUNCTIONS, RENDERING HIM INTO A SIMPLETON, NO LONGER A THREAT TO ANYONE.
TO A WIZARD OF HIS STATURE, THAT IS A FATE FAR WORSE THAN DEATH.

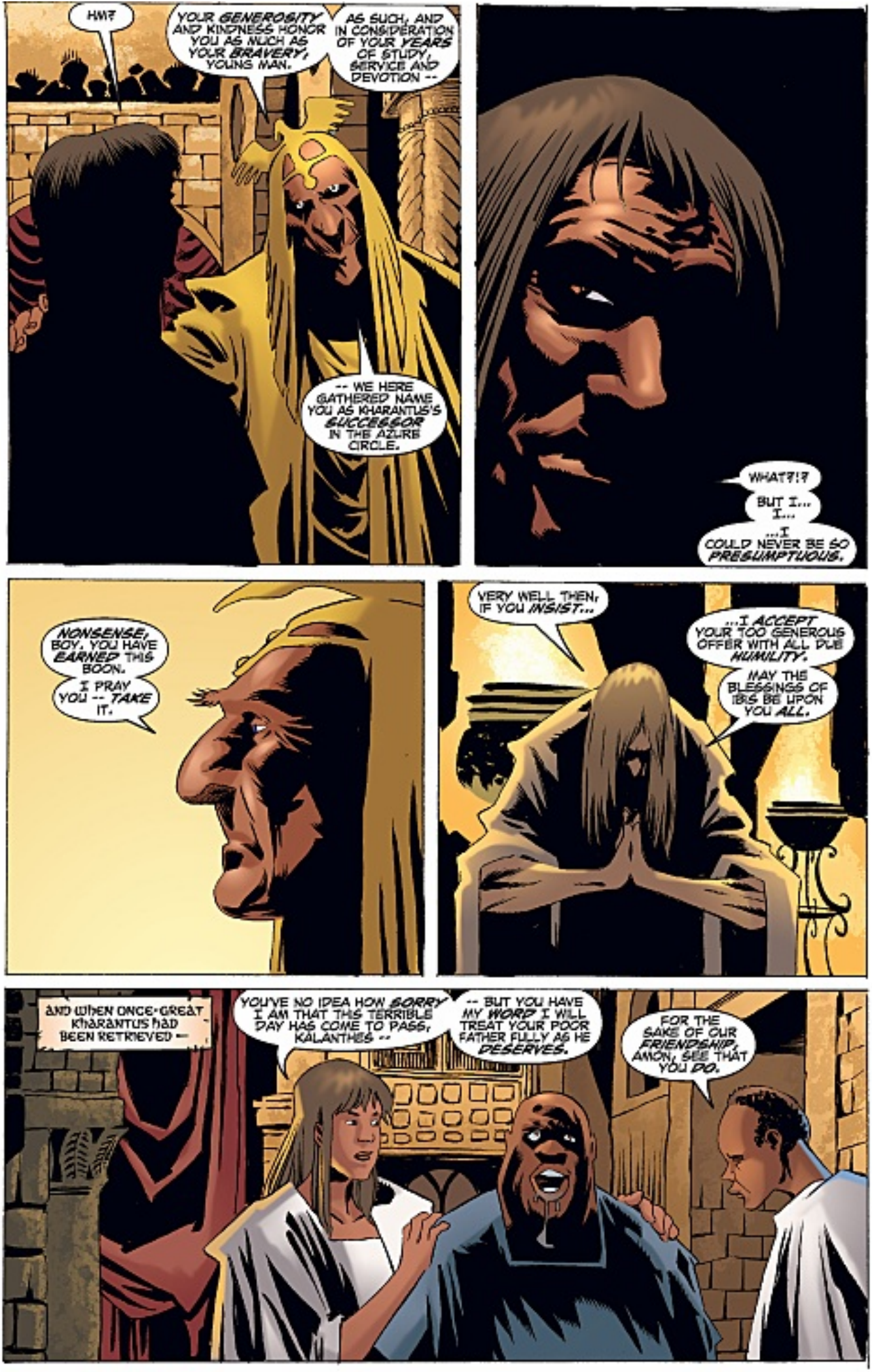
MEN-AT-ARMS, TAKE THIS PATHETIC CREATURE AWAY.
CAST HIM OUT, TO LIVE THE REMAINDER OF HIS DAYS A MINDLESS BEGGAR.

FATHER! FATHER, BE STRONG.
NO MATTER WHAT YOU SAID, NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE SAYS, I WILL NEVER BELIEVE YOU DID THIS TERRIBLE THING. IF IT TAKES THE REMAINDER OF MY LIFE --

-- I WILL PROVE YOUR INNOCENCE.
I WILL SAVE YOU FROM THIS CRUEL FATE!

MOST HIGH, I BEG YOU -- WAIT!
ONE MORE MOMENT OF YOUR PRECIOUS TIME?
EH?

WHAT NOW? HAVE YOU NOT DONE ENOUGH THIS DAY, AMON?
MY APOLOGIES, LORD. I SEEK TO HEAL, NOT HARM.
RATHER THAN CAST KHARANTUS OUT, COULD HE POSSIBLY BE GIVEN TO ME INSTEAD --
-- ALLOW HIM TO DO SERVICE AS MY MANSERVANT?
WHAT? BUT WHY?
IT WOULD KEEP HIM FROM THE UNMERCIFUL ELEMENTS, AS HIS SON, MY FRIEND KALANTHES, DESIRES.
ALSO, IT WOULD ALLOW ME IN SOME SMALL WAY TO REPAY HIS MANY KINDNESSES TO ME BEFORE HE TURNED TO THE DARK ARTS.
AN UNHEARD-OF REQUEST, MY BROTHERS, AND YET...
THEN WE CONCUR?
YOUNG AMON, WE APPLAUD YOUR GENEROSITY. YOUR WISH IS GRANTED.
KHARANTUS IS NOW YOURS TO DO WITH AS YOU WILL.
A THOUSAND THANKS, MOST HIGH. YOU SHALL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.
HOLD. WE ARE NOT FINISHED.


HM?
YOUR GENEROSITY AND KINDNESS HONOR YOU AS MUCH AS YOUR BRAVERY, YOUNG MAN.
AS SUCH, AND IN CONSIDERATION OF YOUR YEARS OF STUDY, SERVICE AND DEVOTION --
-- WE HERE GATHERED NAME YOU AS KHARANTUS'S SUCCESSOR IN THE AZURE CIRCLE.
WHAT?!?
BUT I... I...
...I COULD NEVER BE SO PRESUMPTUOUS.
NONSENSE, BOY. YOU HAVE EARNED THIS BOON.
I PRAY YOU -- TAKE IT.
VERY WELL THEN, IF YOU INSIST...
...I ACCEPT YOUR TOO GENEROUS OFFER WITH ALL DUE HUMILITY.
MAY THE BLESSINGS OF IBIS BE UPON YOU ALL.
AND WHEN ONCE-GREAT KHARANTUS HAD BEEN RETRIEVED --
YOU'VE NO IDEA HOW SORRY I AM THAT THIS TERRIBLE DAY HAS COME TO PASS, KALANTHES --
-- BUT YOU HAVE MY WORD I WILL TREAT YOUR POOR FATHER FULLY AS HE DESERVES.
FOR THE SAKE OF OUR FRIENDSHIP, AMON, SEE THAT YOU DO.

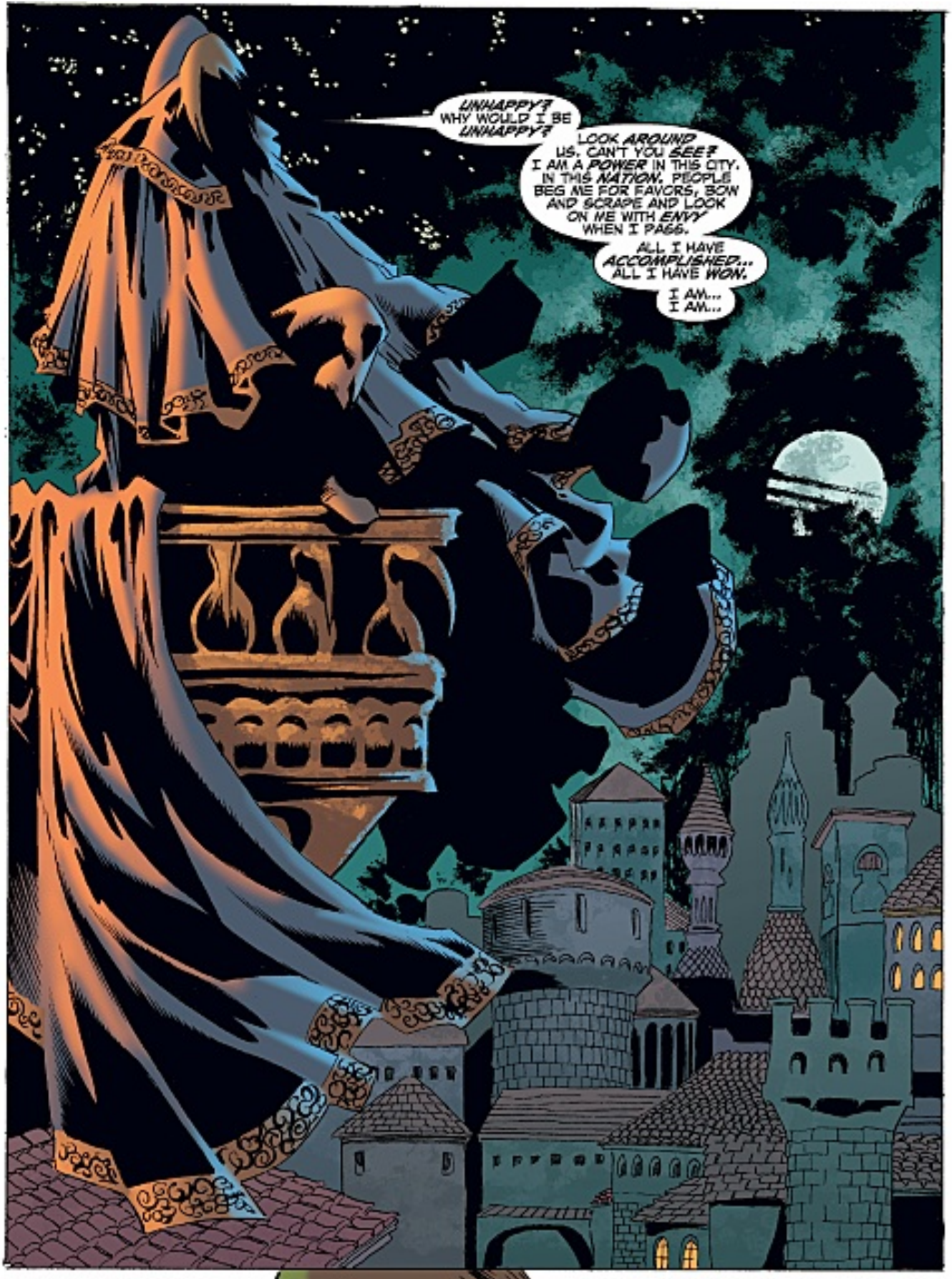
AND THE RIVER FLOWED. AND THE RIVER FLOWED.
AND THE NEXT MONTHS PASSED BLESSEDLY FOR THOTH. IN THE TEMPLE, HE MOVED FROM HUMBLE QUARTERS TO THE LAVISH ONES OF HE WHO NOW SERVED HIM...
IN THE STREETS, MORE BODIES WERE FOUND, EACH MORE HIDEOUSLY DISFIGURED THAN THE LAST...
...AND EACH AN UNFORTUNATE PRIEST OF THE AZURE CIRCLE.
WITH EACH NEW DEATH, THOTH ROSE HIGHER THROUGH THE RANKS OF THE DEVOTED AND FAITHFUL...
...WHILE KALANTHES, ONCE THOTH'S CLOSEST FRIEND AND CHAMPION, STOOD MUTELY ON THE SIDELINES...
...HIS UNEASE AND SUSPICION GROWING GREATER WITH EVERY PASSING DAY.

AND FINALLY, MOST WISE, ON A DRY AND DUSTY AFTERNOON UNDER THE SUN-GOD'S MERCILESS GAZE --
I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE AZURE CIRCLE HIMSELF.
HIS FLESH WAS GNAWED AWAY BY RATS.
YET ANOTHER WORSHIPER OF IBIS SUFFERING A HORRIFIC DEATH...
WHEN WILL IT END?
WE HAVE ENEMIES. WHO WILL PROTECT US, IF IBIS CANNOT?
HMM. THERE ARE OTHER GODS, MIGHTIER, FIERCER, IF IBIS CAN'T PROTECT HIS OWN PRIESTS --
-- MAYBE IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE.
YOU DON'T -- DON'T MEAN --
SHE MEANS SET. I HAD ALWAYS BEEN TAUGHT THAT SUCH THINGS WERE UNTHINKABLE. BUT THE MEN OF SHEM ARM THEMSELVES FOR WAR.
THE DESERT BANDITS RAID OPENLY NOW.
SOMEONE MUST PROTECT US.
THE WAY THINGS FALL APART THESE DAYS...
...WHAT WOULD WE HAVE TO LOSE?
OPEN TALK OF THE DARK GOD SET ON THE STREETS. OPEN TALK OF SET -- AFTER SO MANY CENTURIES FORBIDDEN.
IN IBIS'S GOOD NAME, WHAT IS THIS WORLD COMING TO?

BUT THOUGH TURMOIL THRIVED AND GREW IN SAD MEMPHIS, ONE SOUL REMAINED CALM, IF SOUL HE STILL POSSESSED —
RUIN THE HEM, CLOD, AND YOU GET ANOTHER BEATING.
EVERYTHING MUST BE PERFECT WHEN I AM RAISED TO MASTER OF PRIESTLY DEVOTIONS.
THEN, AS IF WAFTED ON THE COOL NIGHT BREEZE —
AND DOES THAT MAKE YOU HAPPY, THOTH?
WHAT? WHO SPOKE?
YOU SAID YOU WOULD NOT REMAIN A BEGGAR, THOTH, AND YOU HAVE NOT. DOES YOUR NEWFOUND WEALTH AND POWER MAKE YOU HAPPY?
GO AWAY, CURSE YOU! LEAVE ME BE!
THE LAST THING I NEED TO HEAR ARE VOICES IN MY HEAD!
DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE A CHOICE?
I WARN YOU --!
WARN ME, AMON?
OH, KALANTHES! I DID NOT HEAR YOU ENTER. I AM MERELY -- NERVOUS.
BUT WHY ARE YOU NOT DRESSED? I UNDERSTOOD YOU WERE TO BE MADE MASTER OF RITUALS TONIGHT.

I HAVE DECLINED THE OFFICE, SINCE WHAT BEFELL MY FATHER, I FIND I HAVE NO WISH FOR THE POWER TO JUDGE OTHERS.
I WILL SERVE IBIS IN MY OWN WAY.
I SEE. AND WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?
YOU DO.
PEOPLE HAVE BEGUN TO TURN THEIR BACKS ON GREAT IBIS AND SEEK SPIRITUAL ALTERNATIVES ELSEWHERE.
YOU HAVE POWER IN THE CIRCLE. YOU CAN MOVE THEM TO ACT.
YOU MUST RESTORE THE PEOPLE'S FAITH IN OUR GOOD LORD.
AH, KALANTHES, I AM AWARE OF THE PROBLEM, AND WILL DO ALL WITHIN MY POWER TO FIX IT. BUT MY POWER IS LIMITED, OLD FRIEND.
AFTER ALL, I AM HARDLY A GOD MYSELF.
STILL, I WOULD NOT WORRY MYSELF UNDULY WERE I YOU. IBIS ABIDES, DOES HE NOT?
AND I HAVE HEARD IT SAID THAT PEOPLE ULTIMATELY GET EXACTLY THE FORM OF RELIGION THEY DESERVE.
I PRAY YOU ARE RIGHT, AMON. BUT, FRANKLY, OF LATE I HAVE BEGUN TO HAVE MY DOUBTS.
GOOD NIGHT, FATHER. AND YOU, OF COURSE, AMON.

POOR, FOOLISH KALANTHES. HE PLEADS HIS CASE TO THE WRONG COURT.
DOESN'T HE, DOLT?
...HNH...
¡PHASH!¡ YOU BEGIN TO BORE ME. GET OUT, FOOL! SLEEP LIKE A DOG OUTSIDE MY DOOR.
I WISH TO SAVOR THIS SWEET MOMENT ALONE.
LOOK, FATHER! LOOK AT ME!
LOOK UP, FROM WHATEVER GUTTER YOU HAVE SURELY DIED IN BY NOW -- AND SEE WHAT THE LITTLE STREET THIEF YOU SIRED HAS BECOME!
YOU THOUGHT ME INCOMPETENT, CURSE YOUR BLACK HEART -- A FAILURE!
BUT LOOK AT ME NOW -- I AM MASTER OF ALL I SURVEY!
I HAVE EVERYTHING I HAVE EVER WANTED!
THEN WHY, THOTH, ARE YOU NOT HAPPY?
HNH.
I THOUGHT YOU'D GONE, VOICE.
NEVER.
WHY ARE YOU UNHAPPY?


UNHAPPY? WHY WOULD I BE UNHAPPY?
LOOK AROUND US. CAN'T YOU SEE? I AM A POWER IN THIS CITY. IN THIS NATION. PEOPLE BEG ME FOR FAVORS, BOW AND SCRAPE AND LOOK ON ME WITH ENVY WHEN I PASS.
ALL I HAVE ACCOMPLISHED... ALL I HAVE WON.
I AM... I AM...

I AM UNHAPPY. DAMN YOU TO SET'S BLACK MAW, VOICE. I AM UNHAPPY BECAUSE...
...IT ISN'T ENOUGH.

CONAN: BOOK OF THOTH #3

SAD MEMPHIA. SAD, TROUBLED MEMPHIA.
OR PERHAPS, WISEST OF SCHOLARS, IT SHOULD BE "SAD, TROUBLED STYGIA" I WRITE. FOR AS DARK CLOUDS GREW ABOUT ITS CAPITAL, ALL THE NATION FELT ITS SHADOWS.
AYE. EVEN IN THE FOOTHILLS FAR SOUTH OF THE CITY —
— WHERE VILLAGERS HAD BEEN SO LOYAL FOR SO LONG —
PLEASE... I BEG YOU... WE HAVE GIVEN ALL WE CAN THESE LAST MONTHS.
IF YOU TAKE MORE IN TAXES, MY FAMILY AND I WILL STARVE.
STYGIA'S ARMIES PROTECT YOU, PEASANT. HER PRIESTS GUIDE YOU. ALL MUST PAY THEIR SHARE. MUCH HAS BEEN GIVEN YOU. MUCH IS REQUIRED.
BUT -- THESE HILLS ARE PEACEFUL -- AND WE HAVE NO --
SILENCE! I PROMISE YOU, DIRT-GRUBBER, THAT ONE WAY OR ANOTHER --
HUNFF!
-- YOU WILL PAY. PERHAPS WE'LL TAKE THIS WHELP OF YOURS.
SOLD AS A SLAVE, HE SHOULD BRING A FAIR ENOUGH --
N-NO... PLEASE...!
HH.
SHHKKH

IT IS SAID THAT WHEN THEY CAME, EVEN THE COLDEST OF HEARTS QUAILED, AND THE GRIMMEST COUNTENANCE TURNED PALE.
IT IS SAID. BUT FEW CAN KNOW.
RUN -- RUN!
NO! NOT THEM!
NOT HERE! NOT NOW --!
HOW DID THEY FIND US? HOW DID THEY KNOW WE WERE --
-- GGKK!
FOR THEY CAME FROM THE HILLS -- HARD, ROCKY HILLS, THAT COULD BREAK ALL BUT THE HARDIEST MEN.
THEY CAME AT FULL GALLOP, DUST AND THUNDER AROUND THEM, THEIR BLOODCURDLING CRIES ECHOING IN THE SKY.
AND THEY BROUGHT WITH THEM NO MERCY.
The SERPENT RISES

KILL THEM, BROTHERS!
KILL ALL WHO BLEED THE SOUTHLANDS DRY TO SATE THE BELLIES OF MEMPHIA!
KAAAAAA--

SHUK!
YOU ARE FREE NOW, BROTHERS AND SISTERS.
YOU NEED NEVER FEAR FOUL MEMPHIA'S TAXMEN AGAIN.
WH-WHO ARE YOU, STRANGER?
I AM AKKAD OF THE DANU.
AKKAD OF THE FREE HILLMEN. ONCE WE WERE SLAVES LIKE YOURSELVES, WHO TOILED AND FOUGHT FOR THE PLEASURE OF STYGIAN NOBILITY.
NOW WE ARE A NATION, AND YOU ARE A PART OF IT, FREE AND SAFE.
TH-THEN -- YOU WILL RETURN OUR MONEY?
HA. THAT IS THE QUESTION, ISN'T IT? THE VERY ESSENCE OF FREEDOM.
THE FREE HILLMEN HAVE WARRIORS TO FEED, TOO, AND WEAPONS TO MAKE OR BUY.
BUT WE HAVE NO FAT PRIESTS TO PAY, NOR GOLDEN TEMPLES AND PALACES TO BUILD.
YOU WILL HAVE SOME OF YOUR COIN BACK, GOOD FARMER. SAY...HALF OF IT.

AND MORE AND MORE, THE BATTLE CRIES OF THE DANU WERE HEARD IN THE SOUTHLANDS.
AND THE THUNDER OF THEIR HOOVES ECHOED, FROM THOSE DISTANT FOOTHILLS TO THE MARBLED TEMPLES OF MEMPHIA —
— AND E'EN TO A HIGH, ISOLATED TOWER —
— TO THE CHAMBER OF A PRIEST OF THE AZURE CIRCLE OF IBIS, YOUNG BUT EVER RISING IN POWER AND RESPECT —
AND IF YOU GUESS THAT I REFER TO THE FORMER STREET THIEF THOTH, NOW THE ACCOMPLISHED YOUNG PRIEST AMON...
MM.
OUR SHIPS CLASH UPON THE STYX WITH THOSE OF LYXUS AND AKBITANA. BIBLOS SENSES WEAKNESS, AND SEEKS TO UNDERCUT OUR TRADE.
AND AGGALUN —
...WELL, I HAVE ALREADY SAID YOU MUST BE WISE, HAVE I NOT?
AH, AGGALUN — MOST AMBITIOUS OF MERCHANT-STATES.
Y-YOUR PARDON, MASTER AMON —?
NOW WHAT?!

I SAID, WHAT IS IT? CAN YOU NOT SEE I'M BUSY?
F-FORGIVE MY UNTIMELY INTRUSION, MASTER -- B-BUT YOU HAD ASKED TO BE KEPT INFORMED -- !
THEN SPEAK ALREADY, CURSE YOU!
TH-THE DANU HAVE RAIDED YET ANOTHER OF THE OUTLYING VILLAGES, MASTER. TH-THREE MORE TAX COLLECTORS ARE...DEAD.
AND TH-THE DANU LEADER AKKAD HAS CLAIMED THE VILLAGE AS HIS OWN.
WHAT--?!?
INSOLENT CUR! TO CHALLENGE STYGIA LIKE THIS! TO CHALLENGE ME -- !
M-MASTER -- PLEASE! I AM NOT AKKAD!
GO! BEGONE!
I HAVE MORE IMPORTANT MATTERS TO CONCERN ME NOW.
Y-YES, MASTER! TH-THANK YOU, MASTER!
AKKAD. GOOD OF YOU TO BE SO BOLD.
I WILL SPEAK TO THE CIRCLE, AND WE TO THE KING.
WE WILL...SEND TROOPS.

AND TROOPS WERE SENT INDEED.
JUST AS TROOPS WERE SENT TO GUARD THE SHIPS, AND TO ACCOMPANY MERCHANTS. JUST AS TROOPS ROOTED OUT AND SLEW THREE SCORE OF MEN NEAR SAKKARA—
—ADHERENTS OF SHAMASH, THE VILE SCORPION GOD, IT WAS SAID, THOUGH NONE EVER KNEW FOR CERTAIN.

AND MEMPHIA — NO, STYGIA — HUDDLED IN FEAR. ENEMIES ALL AROUND —
GOOD KALANTHES, HAVE YOU HEARD...?
IT IS A TRAGEDY!

AND OF WHICH TRAGEDY DO YOU SPEAK, FRIEND OSTEPHON?
SADLY, THERE HAVE BEEN SO MANY OF LATE THAT EVEN A STUDIOUS PRIEST OF IBIS CANNOT KEEP TRACK OF THEM ALL.

TWO DEAD, LORD TEBIS AND HIS SON. BOTH IN THE ROYAL LINE OF SUCCESSION.
BOTH DIED, 'TIS SAID, UNDER THE MOST MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES.

GNAWED TO DEATH BY SOME FORM OF VERMIN, I ASSUME?
MAY MERCIFUL IBIS GIVE THEIR SPIRITS WINGS TO THE AFTERLIFE.

B-BUT WHAT ABOUT ME, KALANTHES? WHAT SHOULD I DO?
BEYOND MOURNING FOR THE POOR DEPARTED, CSTEPHON?
I KNOW NOT WHAT YOU MEAN.
IS IT NOT OBVIOUS, MY FRIEND?
I AM NOW SIXTEENTH IN LINE OF SUCCESSION TO THE STYGIAN THRONE. IF THERE ARE MORE KILLINGS... MORE LIKE THESE....
...I FEAR I MAY BE THE NEXT VICTIM.
CSTEPHON, PLEASE -- YOU JUMP AT SHADOWS.
LORD TESIS WAS THIRD IN THE ROYAL LINE. EVEN IF HE WAS KILLED FOR THAT REASON -- WHO WOULD KILL THE SIXTEENTH?
IT IS SAID THAT SEVERAL OF THOSE HIGHER IN SUCCESSION MAY RENOUNCE ANY CLAIM TO THE THRONE.
I THOUGHT -- PERHAPS I SHOULD DO THE SAME. BUT IF IT IS COINCIDENCE, AS YOU SAY --
COINCIDENCE? I THINK NOT.
HM?
THERE ARE OBVIOUSLY DARK FORCES AT WORK HERE, GOOD CSTEPHON.
YOU ARE WISE TO BE WARY.

OH, DEAR AMON! TH-THANK IBIS YOU'RE HERE -- I AM SO CONFUSED!
DO YOU THINK I SHOULD ABANDON MY CLAIM TO THE THRONE, THEN?
BE CALM, CSTEPHON -- AND THINK.
I TOLD YOU TO BE WARY, NOT FOOLISH.
SO LONG AS I LIVE, I ASSURE YOU OF THIS -- YOU HAVE NO REASON TO FEAR.
THIS VERY EVENING, I SHALL ENTREAT ALMIGHTY IBIS TO WATCH OVER YOU AS IF YOU WERE HIS OWN BLOOD --
-- AND PROTECT YOU FROM ALL HARM.
TRUST ME, MY FRIEND. PLACE YOUR FAITH IN ME --
-- AND I SHALL TAKE CARE OF EVERYTHING.
TH-THANK YOU, DEAR AMON.
THINK NOTHING OF IT.
NOW COME, LET ME SEE YOU OUT.
AND NOBLE KALANTHES WATCHED AS THE OTHER YOUNG MEN DEPARTED, READER.
BUT IF SUSPICIONS GREW AND GNAWED AT HIS HEART, HE DID NOT LET IT SHOW.

AND THE KILLINGS DID NOT STOP. IN THE NEXT YEAR, MORE IN THE LINE OF SUCCESSION PASSED UNPLEASANTLY INTO THE AFTERLIFE.
FIVE DEAD. FOUR FAMILIES RENOUNCED ANY CLAIM ON THE THRONE.
AND THEN, ONE DRY AND PARCHING DAY —
THIS IS UNHEARD OF.
DO YOU REALIZE WHAT YOU ARE SAYING, PRINCE DAKHLA?
YOU COME HERE OF YOUR OWN ACCORD AND TELL US IT IS YOU WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATHS OF SO MANY IN THE ROYAL FAMILY?
YOU ARE NOW THE HEIR! ARE YOU MAD?
NAD ONCE, MOST HIGH. BUT NO MORE.
IT WAS I AND I ALONE WHO SLEW THOSE WHO BLOCKED MY PATH TO GLORY, GOOD PRIESTS. I WAS...AMBITIOUS.
AND NOW 'TIS GUILT ALONE THAT HAS DRIVEN ME HERE--
--OVERWHELMING GUILT OVER THE TERRIBLE THINGS I HAVE DONE.
THAT'S IT, YOU PITIFUL FOOL. AS THE BLACK RING COMMANDS...
DIG YOUR GRAVE DEEP.

I AM LEFT WITH NO CHOICE.
YOU ARE BY YOUR OWN WORDS CONDEMNED.
TAKE HIM AWAY.
HE IS TO BE THROWN TO THE CROCODILES THAT SWARM ON THE BANKS OF THE MEAT-CUTTING QUARTER, LIKE THE OTHER OFFAL.
AS IBIS SOARS, IBIS WILLS.
WH-WHAT DID I SAY? WH-WHERE AM I? I--
NO! NO, YOU CAN'T!
NOOOOO!
BE SILENT, FOOL. TRY TO DIE, AT LEAST, LIKE A MAN!
IS IT OVER, AHON? AM I TRULY SAFE? IF BERENIK CANNOT BE FOUND, MY FATHER IS NOW HEIR, AND I FEARED--
BUT IF IT WAS DAKHLA--
OF ALL PEOPLE -- HIM?!?
WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT--?
AND DID NOT DAKHLA ADMIT TO THE CRIMES, FOR ALL TO SEE AND HEAR?
AND IS NOT LORD -- AHEM, PRINCE BERENIK MERELY DELAYED IN JOURNEY FROM PUNT?
TRULY, LORD OSTEPHON -- FOR SUCH YOU ARE, NOW -- YOU MUST BE FAVORED BY THE GODS.
FAVORED BEYOND ALL MEN.

IT WAS ONLY THE NEXT DAY THAT OUR GOOD KING, ADAN-DINAR, WENT ABROAD AGAIN IN HIS CITY, THE SUN-GOD'S RED EYE GLARING HIGH ABOVE.
NO LONGER WARY OF THE TERRIBLE WHIMS OF FATE —
— HE SOUGHT MERELY TO ASSURE HIS ANXIOUS PEOPLE THAT THE THRONE ENDURED, THAT DESPITE THE LONG DAYS OF UNCERTAINTY AND FEAR —
— THERE WAS STABILITY IN THE LAND OF STYGIA —
KRAKKK
NO.

BERENIK'S HEAD WAS DELIVERED TO THE PALACE TWO DAYS HENCE, PRESERVED IN A CASK OF HONEY. AN ACT OF WAR FROM THE DARK-SKINNED PRIMITIVES?
ARE YOU CERTAIN, HUSBAND?

SO IT WAS SAID, AT LEAST.
I HAVE A DUTY, WIFE, TO MY COUNTRY, TO MY LINE, TO MYSELF.
BESIDES, WHAT SORT OF EXAMPLE DO I SET FOR OUR SON OSTEPHON WERE I TO SHIRK SUCH AN HONOR?

I WILL BE KING OF STYGIA, DESPITE THE SO-CALLED CURSE UPON THE --
-- EH?
A-AN EARTHQUAKE? HERE?!?
RRRRMMMBL

B-BUT THAT'S IMPOSSIB --

WHMMPP

...NAME AND TOUCH OF BEAK, WING AND TALON, I PROCLAIM YOU KING.
BUT -- BUT --
RISE, CSTEPHON THE FIRST, KING OF STYGIA! RISE...
...AND GREET YOUR PEOPLE!

H-HELLO.
I'LL T-TRY.
IN TRUTH, GENTLE READER, IT IS HARD TO BLAME THE THRONG FOR THEIR CHEERS, WHICH WERE FAINT AND SCATTERED.

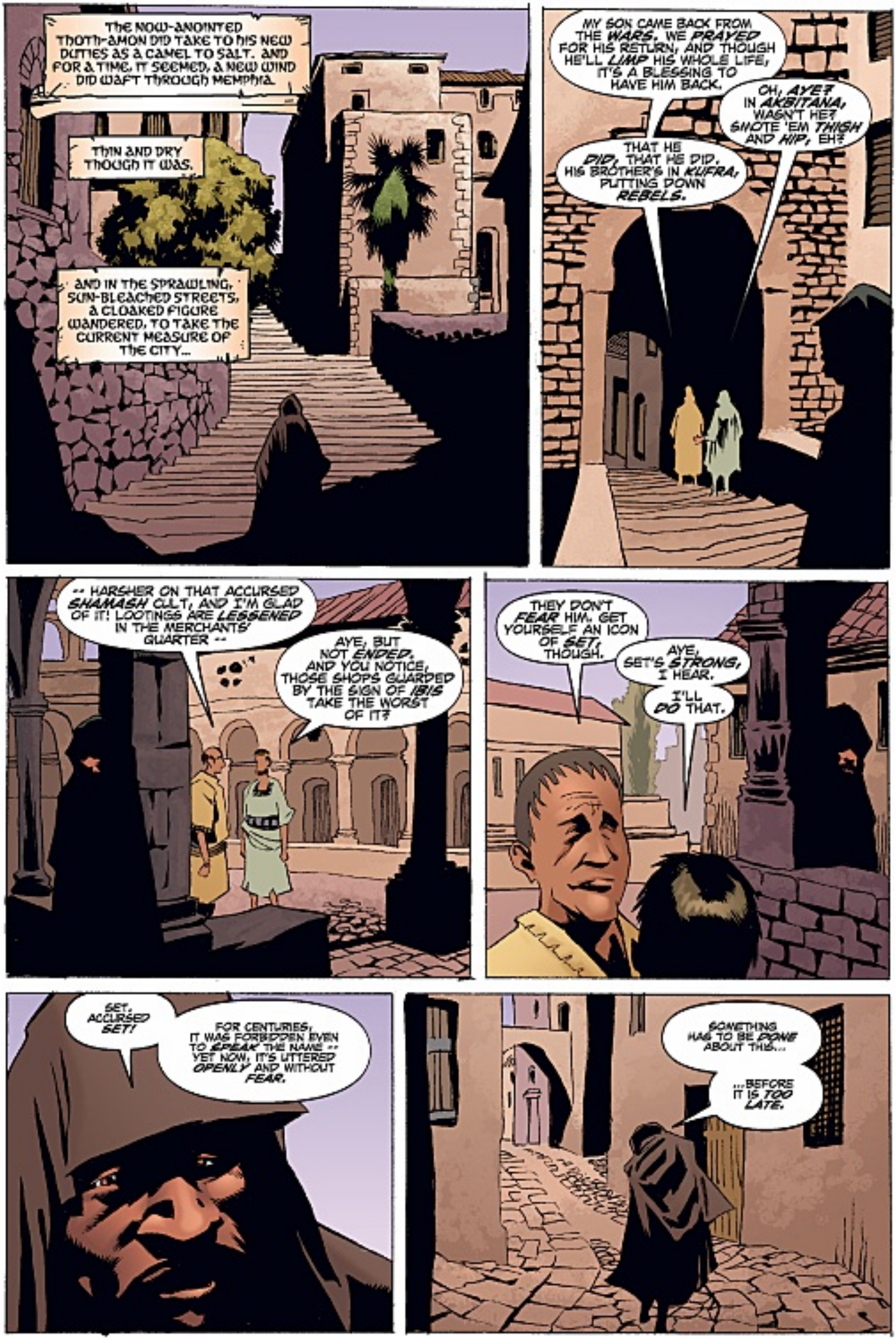
AFTER ALL, THE CITIZENS OF MEMPHIA FULLY EXPECTED TO GREET THEIR NEXT KING WITHIN THE WEEK.
YOU DID WELL, MY LIEGE.
THE PEOPLE SING YOUR PRAISES.
I DON'T KNOW WHY THEY SHOULD, KALANTHES.

I'VE NO IDEA HOW TO BE KING.
I'M NOT PREPARED -- I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO --

UNEASY LIES THE HEAD THAT WEARS THE CROWN, SIRE. BUT FEAR NOT.
I AM HERE TO HELP YOU AS NEEDED.
AS ARE WE BOTH, SIRE, I OFFER MYSELF --
-- TO STAND BETWEEN YOU AND ALL TROUBLES.
AS YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THERE FOR ME, MY FRIEND, TO TEACH AND ADVISE. THE ONE BRIGHT SPOT IN ALL THIS IS MY GOOD FRIENDS.
AND I SHALL HAVE NEED OF SUCH WISE AND DEPENDABLE COUNCIL IN THE DIFFICULT DAYS AHEAD.
YOU HAVE BUT TO ASK, AND IT IS YOURS.
BUT IF YOUNG OSTEPHON THOUGHT TO EASE HIMSELF INTO THE ROLE OF KING, HE WAS DISAPPOINTED.
THE ARMIES OF KUFRA SEIZED THE MOMENT TO ATTACK STYGIA'S WESTERN FLANK, TO RECLAIM TERRITORIES DISPUTED SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL.
TROOPS WERE SENT, AND BLOOD STAINED THE SANDS.

WHILE, IN MEMPHIS ITSELF...
AMON, MILORD?
YOU CHOSE AMON OVER ME AS CHIEF COUNSEL?
KALANTHES --
I DO NOT UNDERSTAND YOUR DECISION, MILORD. THESE ARE TROUBLED TIMES. THEY CALL FOR A CALMING HAND, ASSURED AND CAREFUL STATECRAFT.
AMON HAS DISMISSED YOUR MOST-EXPERIENCED GENERALS, DEMOTED THE MINISTER OF TRADE --
THEY LED US INTO ALL THIS.
AMON SHOWS ME HOW TO ROUT KUFRA, PERHAPS ANNEX THEIR LANDS! WE WILL EXPEL THE AKBITANIAN TRADERS, PUNISH PUNT --
AND FIGHT THREE WARS AT ONCE? WHAT WILL OTHER NATIONS THINK? THAT WE ARE STRETCHED THIN, RIPE FOR THE PLUCKING?
ONCE, PERHAPS, I WOULD HAVE AGREED WITH YOUR CHOICE, MILORD.
BUT OF LATE THERE IS SOMETHING... UNCOMFORTABLE ABOUT AMON. SOMETHING DANGEROUS.
MY CHOICE -- MY CHOICE IS MADE, KALANTHES. AND I BELIEVE... IT IS THE CORRECT ONE.
FOR YOUR SAKE, GREAT KING -- FOR ALL OUR SAKES --
-- I PRAY TO IBIS YOU ARE RIGHT.

FOR ALL KALANTHES' WORRIES, THOUGH, THE STORMS OF FLAME AND BLOOD ABATED FOR A TIME.
AND GOOD KING OSTEPHON MADE ANOTHER DECISION. THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE AZURE CIRCLE WOULD RETIRE.
IT IS TIME FOR A NEW ERA IN STYGIA.
A NEW WIND, TO BRING THE COOL AIR OF NEW TRIUMPHS, NEW HOPE.
SO LET THE NEW HIGH PRIEST RISE...
AND OSTEPHON WOULD NAME AND ANOINT THE NEW HIGH PRIEST HIMSELF.
AND WHO COULD IT HAVE BEEN? AH, BUT YOU MUST ALREADY KNOW.
...FOR I KNOW THE SOUL OF STYGIA IS SAFE IN YOUR CARE, AMON.
NAY, MILORD.
FORGIVE MY IMPUDENCE, MY KING.
BUT SINCE THIS DAY I AM TRANSFORMED, I WISH TO MARK A NEW BEGINNING --
-- TO HONOR ONE WHO WAS AS A BETTER SELF TO ME AS A CHILD.
FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, I AM MERELY AMON NO LONGER. HENCEFORTH, I PRAY YOU...
...CALL ME
THOTH-AMON!


THE NOW-ANOINTED THOTH-AMON DID TAKE TO HIS NEW DUTIES AS A CAMEL TO SALT. AND FOR A TIME, IT SEEMED, A NEW WIND DID WAFT THROUGH MEMPHIS.
THIN AND DRY THOUGH IT WAS.
AND IN THE SPRAWLING, SUN-BLEACHED STREETS, A CLOAKED FIGURE WANDERED, TO TAKE THE CURRENT MEASURE OF THE CITY...
MY SON CAME BACK FROM THE WARS. WE PRAYED FOR HIS RETURN, AND THOUGH HE'LL LIMP HIS WHOLE LIFE, IT'S A BLESSING TO HAVE HIM BACK.
OH, AYE? IN AKBITANA, WASN'T HE? SHOTE 'EM THIGH AND HIP, EH?
THAT HE DID, THAT HE DID. HIS BROTHER'S IN KUFRA, PUTTING DOWN REBELS.
-- HARSHER ON THAT ACCURSED SHAMASH CULT, AND I'M GLAD OF IT! LOOTINGS ARE LESSENED IN THE MERCHANTS' QUARTER --
AYE, BUT NOT ENDED. AND YOU NOTICE, THOSE SHOPS GUARDED BY THE SIGN OF IBIS TAKE THE WORST OF IT?
THEY DON'T FEAR HIM. GET YOURSELF AN ICON OF SET, THOUGH.
AYE, SET'S STRONG, I HEAR.
I'LL DO THAT.
SET. ACCURSED SET!
FOR CENTURIES, IT WAS FORBIDDEN EVEN TO SPEAK THE NAME -- YET NOW, IT'S UTTERED OPENLY AND WITHOUT FEAR.
SOMETHING HAS TO BE DONE ABOUT THIS...
...BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.

AND SOON, AS THE NIGHT-GODDESS SPREAD HER EBON HAIR ACROSS THE SKY ONCE MORE...
I GO TO CONFER WITH THE KING, DOG.
MAKE CERTAIN MY NEW ROBE IS CLEAN UPON MY RETURN -- OR SUFFER FOR YOUR INCOMPETENCE!
GONE? GOOD.
FATHER, IT IS I, KALANTHES.
FATHER, PLEASE -- LOOK AT ME!
OH, SWEET KHARANTUS, DEAR FATHER -- HOW IT SWELLS MY HEART TO SEE YOU AGAIN.
I AM LOST WITHOUT YOU, FATHER -- YOUR STRENGTH, YOUR WISE LEADERSHIP... ALL STYGIA IS WORSE FOR THEIR LACK.
AND NONE MORE THAN I.

BUT THERE IS LITTLE TIME -- AND I NEED YOUR AID.
I KNOW THE HIGH COUNCIL HAS STOLEN YOUR POWER OF SPEECH, HARMED YOUR MIND. CURSE THE FATE THAT BROUGHT YOU SO LOW --
-- BUT STILL I MUST ASK, AND YOU MUST ANSWER. I NEED TO KNOW IF THE TERRIBLE DREAD I HAVE BEEN FEELING IS REAL.
TELL ME, FATHER, CAN THOTH-AMON BE TRUSTED --
-- OR IS HE SOMEHOW AT THE HEART OF THE WICKEDNESS GROWING IN MEMPHIS?
HELP ME, FATHER.
GIVE ME SOME SIGN -- ANY SIGN -- IF WHAT I FEAR IS TRUE.
OH, BIS HELP US ALL, I KNEW IT.
THANK YOU, BLESSED FATHER. THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING.

AND AS KALANTHES SLIPPED ONCE MORE INTO THE SHADOWED NIGHT --
FOUR MORE VILLAGES LOST TO AKKAD AND HIS DAMNED DANU JACKALS, MY KING.
AKKAD?!
WHY HASN'T HE BEEN STOPPED BY NOW?
HE CAN BE, MILORD.
BUT HE IS FAST, AND HE IS SLIPPERY. TO CHOKE THE LIFE FROM HIM ONCE AND FOR ALL, WE MUST CUT OFF HIS SOURCE OF SUPPLIES.
AND THAT SOURCE, MY KING... IS SHEM.
SHEM?
B-BUT SHEM HAS LONG BEEN A VALUED FRIEND TO STYGIA! SOMETIMES, IT SEEMS OUR ONLY FRIEND. LORD ABIDOS SAYS IT IS KESHAN WHO --
ABIDOS?
ABIDOS IS A FOOL, AND IN THE PAY OF OUR ENEMIES.
IT IS SHEM, LORD. AND IT MUST BE DONE IF WE ARE TO PRESERVE OUR PRECIOUS NATION.
TRUST ME, MILORD... TRUST ME!
I... TRUST YOU, DEAR THOTH-AMON. IF YOU SAY IT IS NECESSARY, MY FRIEND --
-- THEN SO MUST IT BE!

AND THERE WAS WAR.
WAR WITH SHEM. AND IN TIME, WAR WITH KESHAN. AND PUNT, AND LYXUS, AND EVEN FAR KHEMI, ON THE SHORE OF THE WESTERN SEA.
AND STYGIA BLED AND BURNED AND KILLED. AND IN HIS TOWER, THOTH-AMON WATCHED AND SMILED.

AND GREAT UNREST THERE WAS IN HEMPHRA, WHERE A FRIGHTENED PEOPLE GRASPED AT ANY SIGN OF PROTECTION THEY COULD —
THIS IS HORRIBLE.
CHAOS IN THE STREETS -- THE CULT OF SET FIGHTS OPENLY WITH THE FOLLOWERS OF ISIS.
OH, THAT POOR STYGIA COULD COME TO THIS...

I PREFER TO THINK OF IT AS EVOLUTION IN ACTION, KALANTHES. WE ARE SORE BESET, ARE WE NOT?
AND IF A GOD IS NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO PROTECT HIS PEOPLE, SHOULD HE NOT BE REPLACED?
DO YOU HEAR YOURSELF? THAT IS BLASPHEMY!
NO, OLD FRIEND. IT IS THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE.

AND SO IT CAME TO PASS, AS INEVITABLE AS FATE.
A SMALL GROUP OF SOMBER MEN GATHERED TOGETHER SECRETLY TO DISCUSS STYGIA'S FUTURE —
THANK YOU FOR COMING, MY FRIENDS.
OF COURSE WE CAME.
WE SHARE YOUR CONCERNS, KALANTHES.
THE WORSHIP OF SET IS RAMPANT THESE SORRY DAYS.
WHAT ARE WE TO DO?
THEY ARE SAYING IT IS THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE, MY FRIEND.
HOW ARE WE TO COUNTER THAT?
NO, NOT THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE...
'TIS THE WILL OF ONE MAN.
AND BEFORE HE DESTROYS OUR BELOVED COUNTRY, WE MUST DEAL WITH HIM AS ONE WOULD A SCORPION IN THE GRANARY, PRIESTS OF IBIS —
-- WE MUST KILL THOTH-AMON!

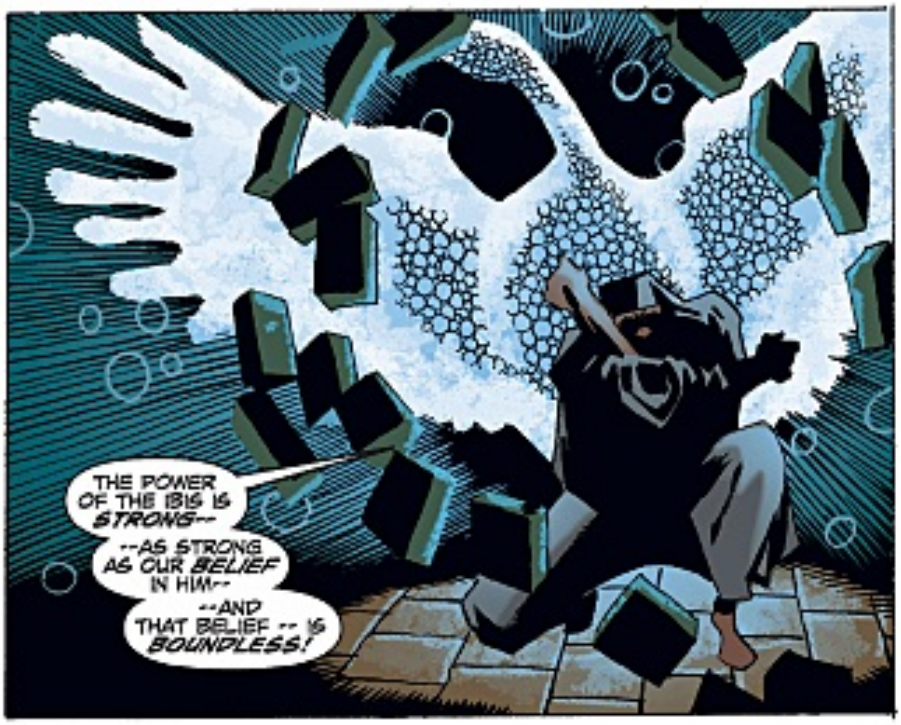
WELCOME, GENTLEMEN.
I HAVE BEEN... EXPECTING YOU.

STRIKE, BROTHERS! FOR MEMPHIA! FOR STYGIA!
IN THE NAME OF IBIS, STRIKE NOW! STRIKE DEEP!
FOOLS. I HAVE ALREADY DIED ONCE.
IT IS NOT AN EXPERIENCE I WILL EASILY REPEAT.
FEEL THE TERRIBLE POWER OF SET, THEN, AND LEARN —
-- THAT BEFORE SUCH FEROCITY, THE PIDDLING POWER OF YOUR PITIFUL BIRD-GOD IS AS NOTHING!
NOTHING!
AAIIGGHH

COME!
FEEL THE FULL, UNFETTERED FURY OF MY GOD, FOOLS--

--AND KNOW THE TRUE MEANING OF DESPAIR!
AARRGGHH

NO!
DO NOT SURRENDER TO DESPAIR, BROTHERS! NEVER SURRENDER!


THE POWER OF THE BIG IS STRONG--
--AS STRONG AS OUR BELIEF IN HIM--
--AND THAT BELIEF -- IS BOUNDLESS!

!BS, NO! N--!
HELP US! SOMEBODY, PLEASE --

YOU CANNOT HARM ME SO EASILY, LIAR PRIEST AND CANKER IN STYGIA'S EYE.
DO YOUR WORST, VILLAIN. MY FAITH PROTECTS ME.

VILLAIN? IT AND WHO IS THE INVADER HERE, HMM?
BUT LET ME REMIND YOU, IN YOUR SO-PROUD FAITH -- YOUR GOD IS A WADING BIRD, A GOD OF PEACE AND HARMONY. MY GOD IS A HUNTER.
A KILLER.

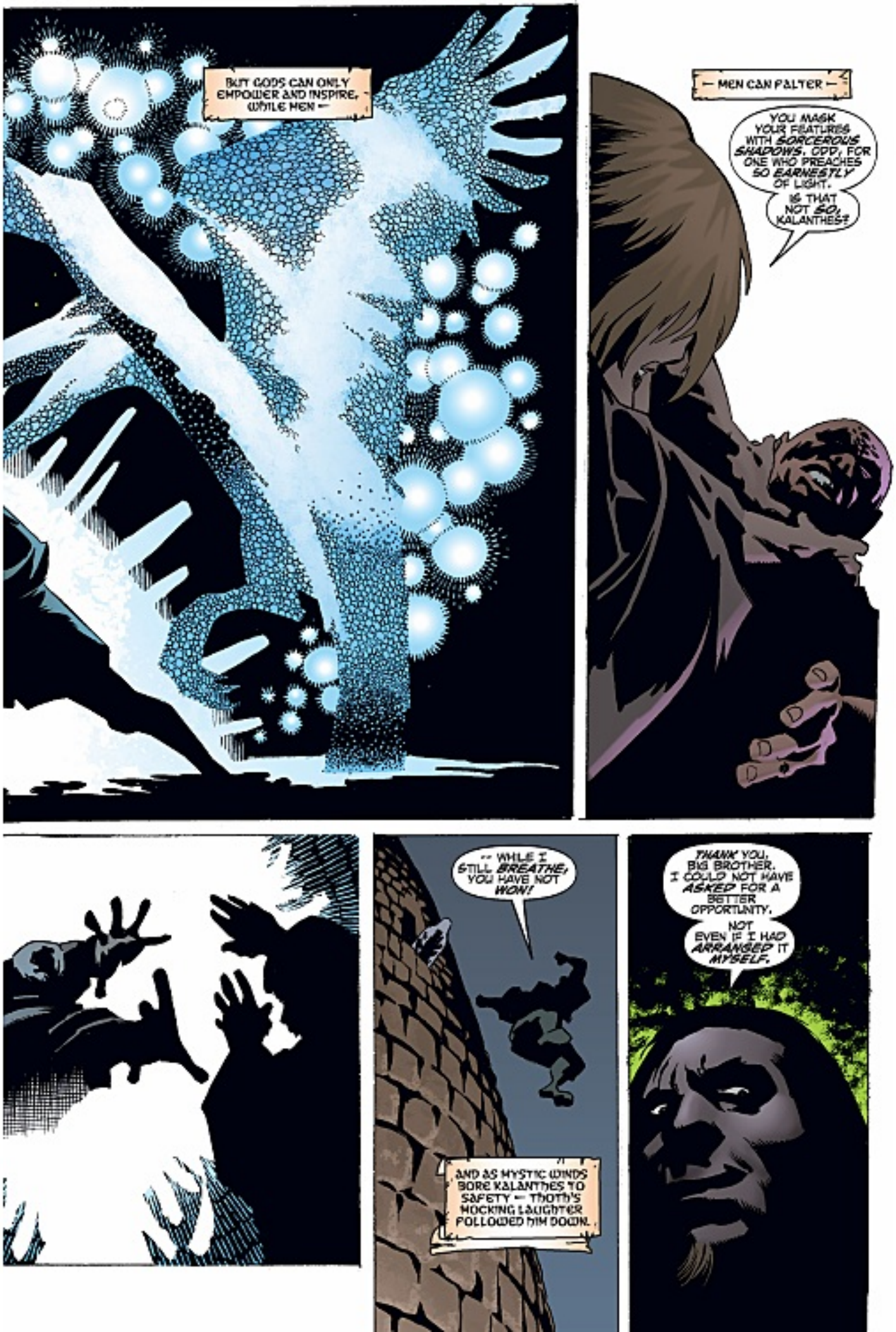
LET US SEE THEN -- WHOSE GOD IS STRONGER!

AND THUS WAS IT JOINED.
A BATTLE NOT MERELY OF MYSTICAL FORCES, OF POWER BEGGED AND BORROWED FROM THE MIGHTY, FOR AN ADVANTAGE SOUGHT HERE, A MOMENT OF POWER THERE.
THIS WAS A BATTLE OF GODS. GODS WHO FOUGHT THROUGH MEN, AS ALWAYS GODS DO —
AND A BATTLE FOR NOTHING LESS THAN THE SOUL, THE SPIRIT, THE DESTINY OF AN ENTIRE NATION.

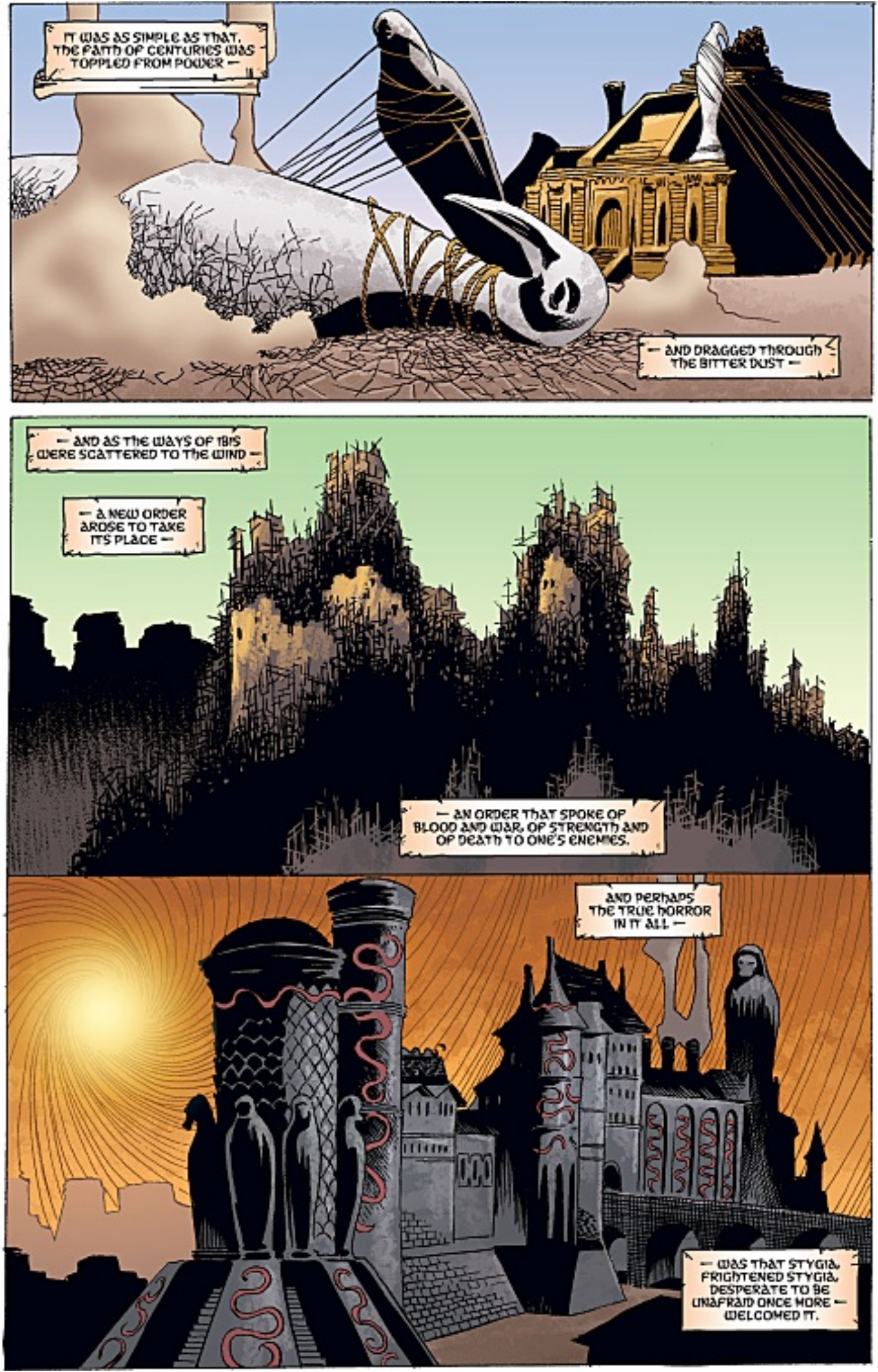
YOU KNEW? OF COURSE YOU KNEW.
I REGRET BEING FORCED TO STRIKE LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT, BUT FOR THE SAFETY OF ALL STYGIA, YOUR EVIL MUST BE ENDED!

ALREADY I HEAR THE TRAMP OF GUARDS RUSHING UP THE STAIRS, PRIEST OF PEACE. EVEN IF YOU COULD HOPE TO BEST ME --
-- COULD YOU KILL THEM, TOO?
WHOK

CURSE YOU, THOTH-AMON!
THE FEATHERS OF THE SUN WILL HOLD BACK YOUR SPELLS FOR THE MOMENTS I NEED.
BUT I SWEAR TO YOU --


BUT GODS CAN ONLY EMPOWER AND INSPIRE, WHILE MEN —
— MEN CAN FALTER —
YOU MASK YOUR FEATURES WITH SORCEROUS SHADOWS. ODD, FOR ONE WHO PREACHES SO EARNESTLY OF LIGHT.
IS THAT NOT SO, KALANTHES?
— WHILE I STILL BREATHE, YOU HAVE NOT WON!
AND AS MYSTIC WINDS BORE KALANTHES TO SAFETY — THOTH'S MOCKING LAUGHTER FOLLOWED HIM DOWN.
THANK YOU, BIG BROTHER. I COULD NOT HAVE ASKED FOR A BETTER OPPORTUNITY.
NOT EVEN IF I HAD ARRANGED IT MYSELF.

AND THUS, THE FOLLOWING MORN —
GOOD PEOPLE OF MEMPHIA, I COME BEFORE YOU WITH A HEAVY HEART.
FOR LAST NIGHT, A BAND OF CRAVEN COWARDS SOUGHT TO SLAY THOTH-AMON -- MY MOST TRUSTED ADVISOR. AND THESE COWARDS --
-- THESE COWARDS WERE PRIESTS OF IBIS!
HAVING PROVEN ITSELF TREASONOUS IN THE EXTREME, I HEREBY DECLARE THE WORSHIP OF IBIS NOW AND FOREVER OUTLAWED IN THE KINGDOM OF STYGIA!
AND HENCEFORTH --
YOU MUST SAY IT, MY LORD KING. FOR THE GOOD OF STYGIA.
AYE. IT JUST FEELS SO -- SO --
IT IS FOR THE BEST.
HENCEFORTH, WE FOLLOW A NEW GOD, A STRONG GOD! HENCEFORTH, ALL STYGIA SHALL WORSHIP SET!
I HEREBY PROCLAIM THE BLESSED THOTH-AMON TO BE HIGH PRIEST OF SET -- AND TELL YOU HE WILL BE MY VOICE AMONG MY PEOPLE!
OBEY HIS WORD AS YOU WOULD MY OWN!
STYGIA!
PEOPLE OF STYGIA, HEAR MY OATH!
BY THE BLACK RING THAT NOW ENCIRCLES MY FINGER, I SWEAR THAT WE WILL BE A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH -- THROUGHOUT THE WORLD!
MAY OUR PEOPLE PRAISE GREAT SET IN THE HIGHEST --
-- AND FROM THIS DAY FORTH, MAY OUR ENEMIES TREMBLE!


IT WAS AS SIMPLE AS THAT. THE PATH OF CENTURIES WAS TOPPLED FROM POWER —
— AND DRAGGED THROUGH THE BITTER DUST —
— AND AS THE WAYS OF IBIS WERE SCATTERED TO THE WIND —
— A NEW ORDER AROSE TO TAKE ITS PLACE —
— AN ORDER THAT SPOKE OF BLOOD AND WAR, OF STRENGTH AND OF DEATH TO ONE'S ENEMIES.
AND PERHAPS THE TRUE HORROR IN IT ALL —
— WAS THAT STYGIA, FRIGHTENED STYGIA, DESPERATE TO BE UNAFRAID ONCE MORE — WELCOMED IT.

AND IN HIS LUSH AND OPULENT QUARTERS, THOTH WATCHED IT HAPPEN AND CHUCKLED DEEP IN HIS THROAT.
HIS GOAL WAS IN SIGHT —
WE ARE AT A TIPPING POINT.
SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES, DRAINED BY TOO MANY WARS, WE ARE ON THE VERGE OF COLLAPSE. OR GLORY.
PERHAPS ONE MORE PUSH. BUT WHAT?

A BASE ATTACK?
A NEW ENEMY?
HERE, PERHAPS.

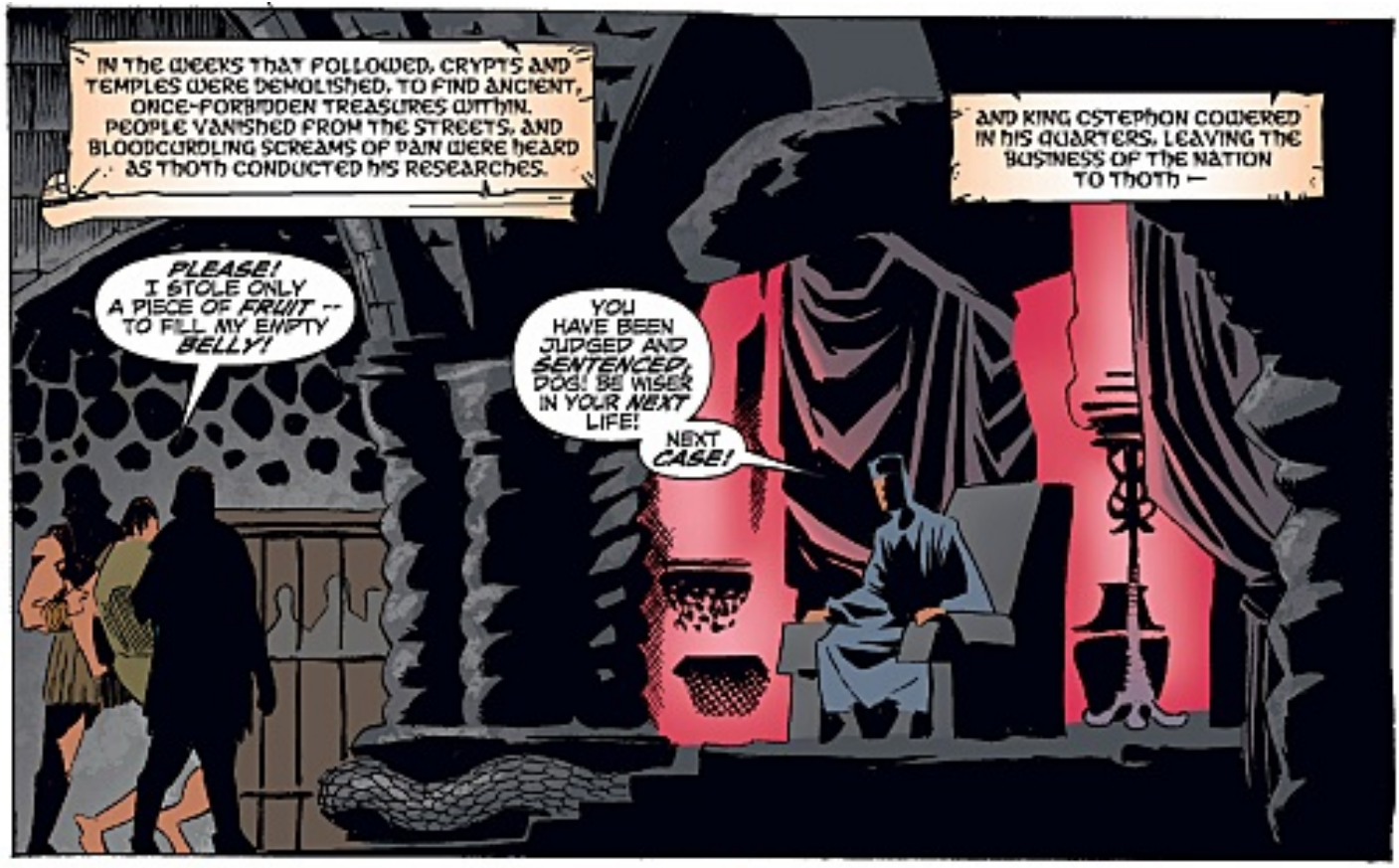
YES, HERE.
KOTH, I THINK, GIVEN SAFE PASSAGE BY SHEIN.
SUCH FOUL, VICIOUS KILLERS...

...TO MURDER AN ENTIRE VILLAGE, SO CLOSE TO MEMPHIA'S SHELTERING WALLS!

IS IT -- IS IT TRUE, FRIEND THOTH? ALL TH-THIS DEVASTATION...
I -- I HAVE NEVER SEEN THE LIKE.
A HEINOUS ATTACK.
THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN OUR ENEMIES ARE ALLOWED TO CONSPIRE.
HAVE WE HARMED KOTH? BUT THEY SEE US ONLY AS PREY, AND --
TH-THIS IS ALMOST BEYOND TOLERANCE. I --
LOOK! IT'S THE KING!
EH?
PLEASE, YOUR HIGHNESS -- HELP US!
WE'VE NO HOMES -- NOTHING TO EAT!
FOR SET'S SAKE -- HELP US!
N-NO! L-LEAVE GO OF ME! LET LOOSE!
H-HELP ME, THOTH! G-GET ME AWAY FROM THESE PEOPLE -- THIS PLACE--!
VERY WELL, MILORD --
SNP

-- AS YOU WISH.
PLEASE, I --
-- OH.
WHY, MY FRIEND? WH-WHY WOULD YOU SUBJECT ME TO SUCH TORMENT?
I -- I AM YOUR KING.
I KNOW, MILORD...
AND, AS SUCH, IT IS CRITICAL FOR YOU TO KNOW WHAT YOUR NATION IS FACING THESE SAD DAYS.
OUR RESOURCES HAVE REACHED THEIR LIMIT, MY KING.
STYGIA IS OVEREXTENDED MILITARILY -- AND YET WE FACE NEW ENEMIES EVERY DAY.
THE TREASURY IS ALMOST BARE. OUR SOLDIERS ARE HARD PRESSED -- THERE ARE NO MEN TO RELIEVE THEM, AND THEY BREAK IN THE FIELD.
OUR ARMORERS HAVE SCANT SOURCES OF STEEL.
I -- I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.
WAS IT NOT YOU WHO RECOMMENDED THE VERY COURSES OF ACTION THAT HAVE LED US TO THIS CRISIS?

I DID WHAT WAS *BEST* FOR MY NATION AT THE *TIME*, O KING. WHAT WAS *NEEDED*.
WHAT IS NEEDED *NOW*, THOUGH, IS *POWER*. POWER ENOUGH TO *SAVE* OUR COUNTRY. YOU DO NOT WISH TO BE THE KING WHO *FAILED* STYGIA -- SAW IT *DIE*.
NO -- *NO!* OF *COURSE* NOT.
STYGIA MUST *NOT FALL*. IT *CANNOT!* YOU ARE RIGHT -- WE NEED POWER -- *GREAT POWER!*
B-BUT WHAT POWER *EXISTS*, DEAR THOTH-AMON, *STRONG* ENOUGH TO PULL OUR NATION FROM THE MIRE THAT THREATENS TO *ENGULF* IT?
I DO NOT *KNOW*.
WHAT? BUT--
I DO NOT *KNOW*. BUT I HAVE NOT *GIVEN UP*, GOOD CSTEPHON, AND I NEVER SHALL. I HAVE *RESEARCHES* TO CONDUCT -- RESEARCHES *DARK* AND *TERRIBLE*.
HAVE *FAITH*, YOUR MAJESTY, IN YOUR *ADVISORS*... IN YOUR *GODS*. AN ANSWER *WILL* BE FOUND.
I *PROMISE* YOU THAT.


IN THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED, CRYPTS AND TEMPLES WERE DEMOLISHED, TO FIND ANCIENT, ONCE-FORBIDDEN TREASURES WITHIN. PEOPLE VANISHED FROM THE STREETS, AND BLOODCURDLING SCREAMS OF PAIN WERE HEARD AS THOTH CONDUCTED HIS RESEARCHES.
AND KING OSTEPHON COWERED IN HIS QUARTERS, LEAVING THE BUSINESS OF THE NATION TO THOTH —
PLEASE! I STOLE ONLY A PIECE OF FRUIT -- TO FILL MY EMPTY BELLY!
YOU HAVE BEEN JUDGED AND SENTENCED, DOG! BE WISER IN YOUR NEXT LIFE!
NEXT CASE!

PLEASE, MOST HIGH, THIS IS A MISTAKE! THEY ARRESTED THE WRONG MAN!
I AM INNOCENT OF ANY WRONGDOING!

YES, YES, YOU AND EVERY OTHER CRAVEN CUR BROUGHT BEFORE ME TO FACE THE KING'S JUSTICE.
I SENTENCE YOU TO --
EH?

THAT SCAR. IS IT YOU?
AFTER ALL THESE LONG YEARS, CAN IT TRULY BE YOU?

I -- I DON'T UNDERSTAND, MOST HIGH. HAVE WE MET BEFORE --?
BUT THOTH WAS LOST IN MEMORY —

— A MEMORY OF A YOUTH WHO HAD BEATEN HIM, STOLEN HIS SCANT STORE OF JEALOUSLY HOARDED TREASURE —
MOST HIGH?
YOU MAY HAVE YOUR FREEDOM, LOWLY ONE.
OH, YOU ARE MERCIFUL BEYOND MEASURE, MOST HIGH.
MY CHILDREN AND MY CHILDREN'S CHILDREN WILL SING YOUR PRAISES FOR AS LONG AS WE --
MUST BE AT LEAST EIGHTEEN PIASTORS HERE, I'M THINKING.
OUR FORTUNES ARE MADE!
BUT WAIT. THERE IS A PRICE.
THE COST OF YOUR FREEDOM IS...OH, LET'S SAY EIGHTEEN PIASTORS.
BUT -- BUT --
DID THE SCARRED AND ROUGH-HEWN THIEF KNOW, THEN?
DID HE REMEMBER?

IF SO, THEN SURELY HE KNEW THAT IF HE DARED SAY ANYTHING, HE WOULD DIE ON THE SPOT.
I -- I --
I HAVE SOME MONEY -- JUST A LITTLE, BUT --
...NINE...
...TWELVE...
SEVENTEEN PIASTORS, MOST HIGH! I HAVE SEVENTEEN FOR YOU!
BUT I CAN GET THE OTHER ONE! BY DAY'S END, I WILL COME TO YOU WITH --
SORRY.
MY OFFER ENTAILED CASH ON DEMAND.
TAKE HIM AWAY. HAVE HIS EYES BURNED FROM HIS SKULL.
AND LET HIM ROT IN THE DUNGEONS FOR THE REST OF HIS MISERABLE LIFE!
NO! PLEASE! ONE PIASTOR! I CAN GET IT FOR YOU, MOST HIGH!
I CAN -- I CAN --
WRETCHED FOOL...

...BELIEVING HE COULD ACTUALLY BUY HIS LIFE WITH A PALMFUL OF COINS AND...
...TRINKETS...
THIS RING. BUT -- HE DID NOT TAKE THIS RING...
MEMORY AGAIN —

— OF PLACING THAT RING, THAT SELFSAME RING, ON THE FINGER OF HIS SISTER THE NIGHT HE'D SAID GOODBYE — OF THE PROMISE THAT WENT WITH IT —
I TOLD HER I WOULD RETURN FOR HER. I TOLD HER SHE'D WANT FOR NOTHING.

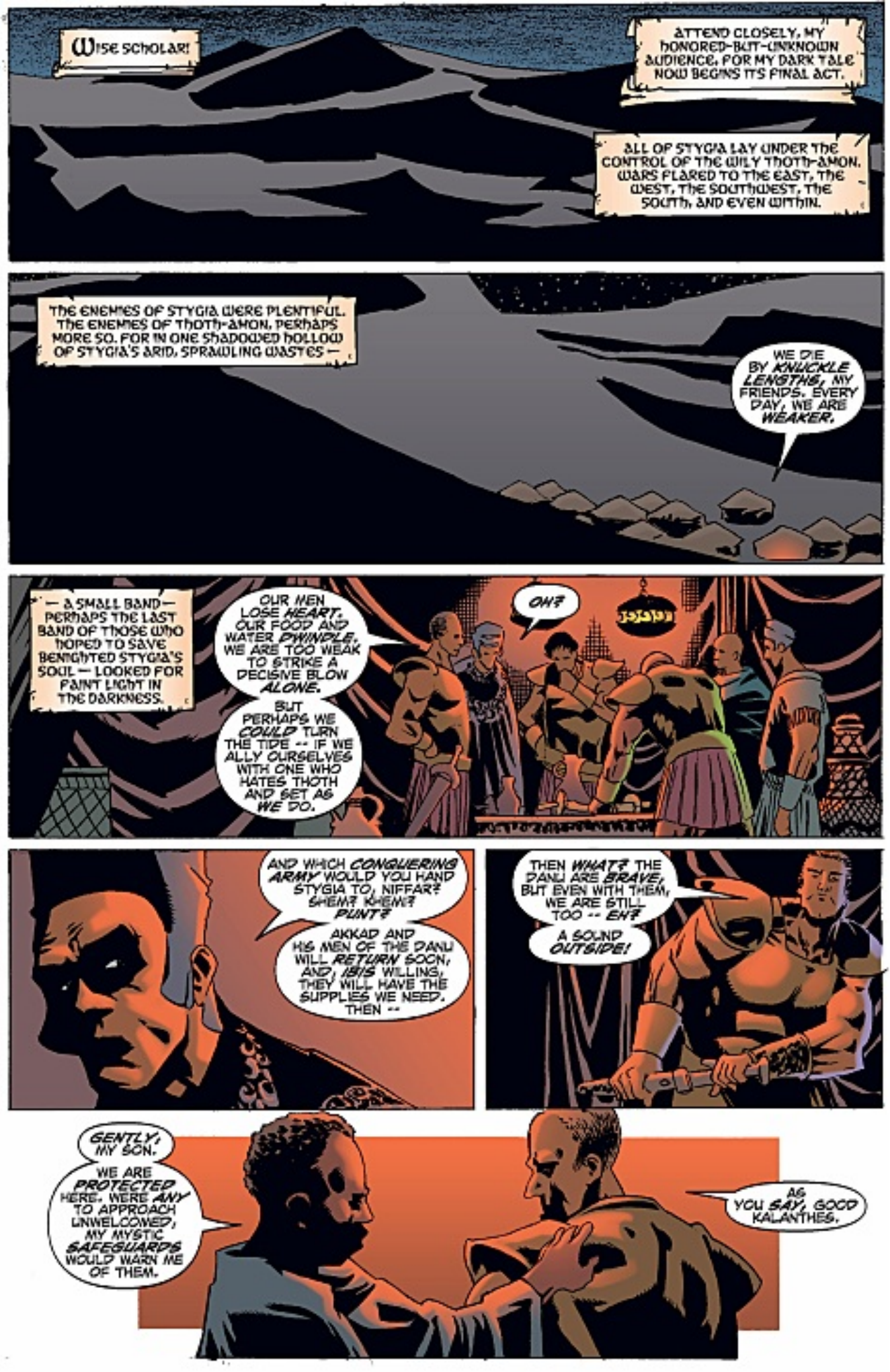
YOU THERE! I HAVE A TASK FOR YOU.
NAME IT, MOST HIGH -- AND IT SHALL BE DONE.
NATURALLY.

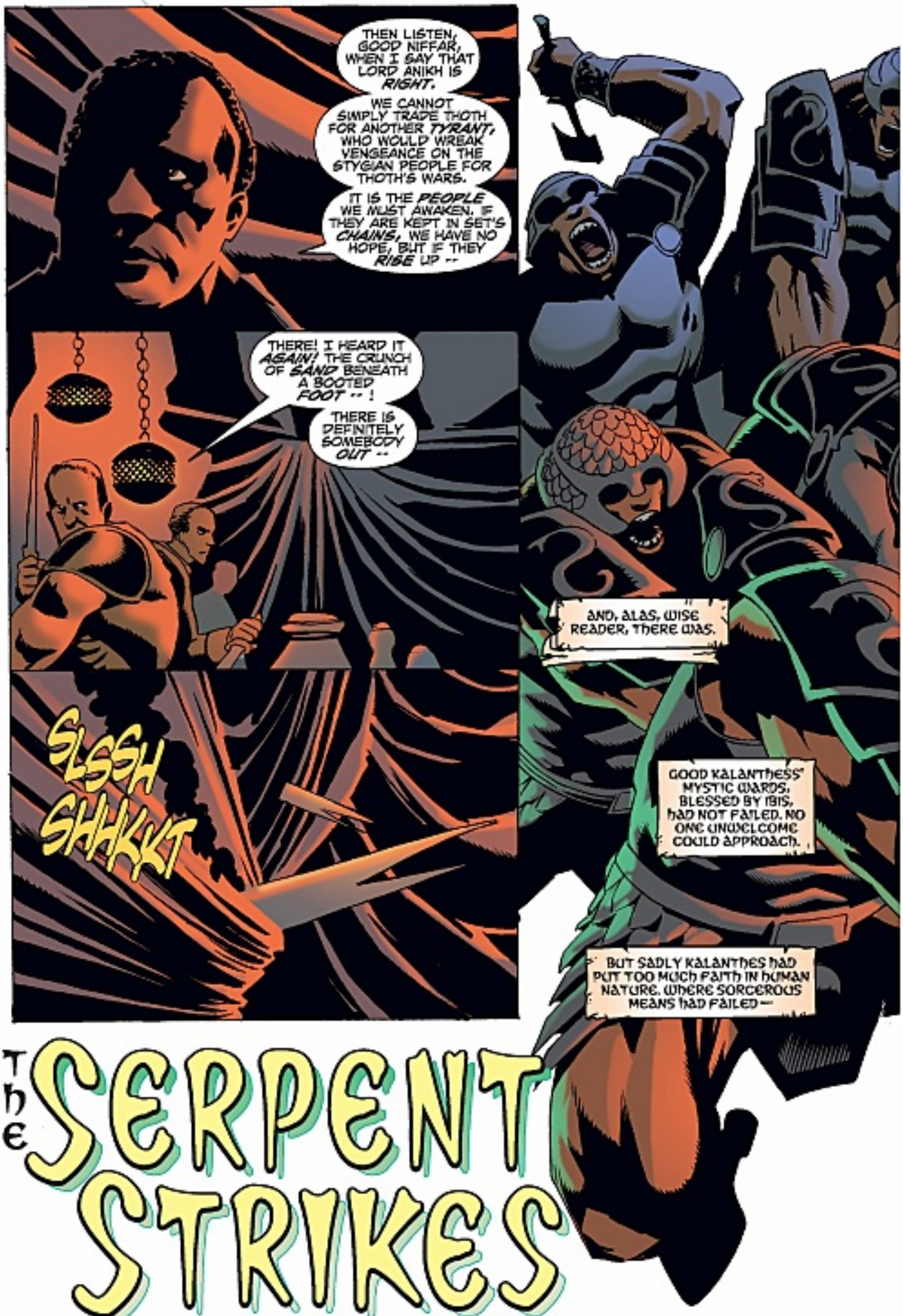
IN ONE OF THE SMALL VILLAGES SCATTERED OUTSIDE THE CITY, THERE LIVES A GIRL -- NAY, BY NOW A YOUNG WOMAN -- NAMED AYINA.
FIND THIS WOMAN. BRING HER SAFELY TO ME -- NO MATTER HOW LONG IT MAY TAKE.

I WILL NOT FAIL YOU, MOST HIGH.
NONE STILL LIVE WHO HAVE.
A MOST CURIOUS DAY, THIS --
-- TO TASTE BOTH SWEET REVENGE AND WISTFUL MEMORY IN THE SAME MEAL.

AND YET PERHAPS IT WAS A SIGN.
A SIGN OF MY COMING ASCENSION.
FOR EVERYTHING IS PREPARED, ALL IS IN PLACE.
MY "RESEARCHES" HAVE TAUGHT ME, NOT WHAT POWER TO INVOKE, FOR THAT I KNEW ALL ALONG -- THEY HAVE TAUGHT ME HOW IT IS TO BE DONE.
AND ALL THAT REMAINS...
...IS TO WALK THAT PITIABLE FOOL, CASTEPHON DOWN THE PATH I HAVE SO PAINSTAKINGLY PREPARED FOR HIM.
THE PATH THAT WILL SAVE STYGIA FROM ALL THAT I HAVE BROUGHT DOWN ON HER. AYE, AND THE PATH THAT WILL MAKE ME MASTER OF ALL THAT LIVES.
IT IS TIME TO SHOW HIM POWER. TIME TO SHOW HIM...
ACHERON.

CONAN: BOOK OF THOTH #4


Wise scholar!
Attend closely, my honored-but-unknown audience, for my dark tale now begins its final act.
All of Stygia lay under the control of the wily Thoth-Amon. Wars flared to the east, the west, the southwest, the south, and even within.
The enemies of Stygia were plentiful. The enemies of Thoth-Amon, perhaps more so. For in one shadowed hollow of Stygia's arid, sprawling wastes —
We die by knuckle lengths, my friends. Every day, we are weaker.
— a small band — perhaps the last band of those who hoped to save benighted Stygia's soul — looked for faint light in the darkness.
Our men lose heart. Our food and water dwindle. We are too weak to strike a decisive blow alone.
But perhaps we could turn the tide -- if we ally ourselves with one who hates Thoth and set as we do.
Oh?
And which conquering army would you hand Stygia to, Niffar? Shem? Khemi? Punt?
Akkad and his men of the Danu will return soon, and, Ibis willing, they will have the supplies we need. Then --
Then what? The Danu are brave, but even with them, we are still too -- eh?
A sound outside!
Gently, my son.
We are protected here. Were any to approach unwelcomed, my mystic safeguards would warn me of them.
As you say, good Kalanthes.



The SERPENT STRIKES

HRAAAAAA
DEFEND YOURSELVES, MY BROTHERS!
— ONE OF THEIR MEN HAD WELCOMED THE ENEMY IN, SOLD OUT THEIR CAUSE FOR A HANDFUL OF GOLD.

I AM SORRY, MAN OF STYGIA, TALONS OF IBIS PROTECT ME!
GLKK--
DON'T BE SORRY, KALANTHES! THESE MEN ARE THOTH'S OWN! THEY DO NOT MERELY BELIEVE HIS LIES -- THEY BUTCHER IN HIS NAME!
ALL HIS CRAWLING BROOD MUST DIE!
SHLKKT
FOOL! WORSHIPER OF STORKS!
IT WILL NOT BE ME WHO DIE HERE!
AND THE HARSH-VOICED SOLDIER OF SET WAS RIGHT. FOR THOUGH THE DEFENDERS OF IBIS AND THE OLD ORDER FOUGHT VALIANTLY—
—THEY WERE SORELY OUTMANNED.
BY SLASHING SWORD THEY DIED—
HHHH---!
HUNFF!
—AYE, AND BY THRUSTING SPEAR. THEY DIED, DIED—

—UNTIL ONLY ONE REBEL WAS LEFT STANDING ON THE BATTLEFIELD—
ALMIGHTY IBIS, LEND ME YOUR POWER, THAT I MIGHT --
=HNNH!=
STILL YOUR MOUTH, SORCERER!
YOU MUST SPEAK TO UTTER SPELLS! CALL ON YOUR FAILED GOD AGAIN, AND I WILL CUT OUT YOUR TONGUE!
BROK
NOW KNEEL, KALANTHES, OUTLAW PRIEST, SON OF DISGRACED KHARANTIUS!
KNEEL BEFORE THE POWER OF STYGIA -- THE POWER OF THE SERPENT-GOD SET!
I KNEEL, MEN OF A FORK-TONGUED MASTER, AT THE POINTS OF YOUR BLADES.
I WILL NEVER KNEEL BEFORE FOUL SET, SO IF YOU MEAN TO SLAY ME, GET ON WITH IT! I'LL NOT BEG FOR MERCY --
-- NOT FROM THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF THE WORD.
DO NOT THINK TO ESCAPE THIS WORLD SO EASILY, PRIEST. YOUR DEATH, ALONE IN THESE EMPTY SANDS, WOULD MEAN NOTHING.
NO, CRIMINAL AND HERETIC -- THERE ARE OTHER PLANS FOR YOU.

AND THUS, IN CHAINS AND DEGRADATION, CAME KALANTHES TO THE TEMPLE AT THE HEART OF MEMPHIA. ONE THAT IN AN EARLIER INCARNATION HE HAD HAPPILY CALLED HOME.
THIS TIME, THOUGH, BEFORE THE MASSED, MURMURING THRONGS OF THE CITY, HE FACED WHAT PASSED FOR JUSTICE IN THOSE SORRY DAYS—
—JUSTICE, IN THE HANDS OF ONE HE HAD ONCE BEFRIENDED—
IT IS CUSTOMARY TO BOW BEFORE THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE NATION, KALANTHES.
NEVER.
AH, MY DEAR INTRACTABLE KALANTHES, WHATEVER AM I TO DO WITH YOU?
ON THE ONE HAND, YOU ARE MY OLDEST FRIEND -- MY OLDEST LIVING FRIEND, AT LEAST --
-- AND FOR YOUR KIND AID I OWE YOU A DEBT.
ON THE OTHER HAND, HOWEVER, YOU NOW LEAD A REBELLION THAT SEEKS TO DESTROY ME AND ALL I HAVE BUILT HERE IN FAIR STYGIA.
SO PERHAPS YOU MIGHT ADVISE ME ONCE MORE, MOST WISE AND THOUGHTFUL ELDER. MY QUANDARY IS THIS...
...DO I SHOW YOU THE MERCY OF A BROTHER TO A BROTHER?
OR THE PITILESS JUSTICE A TRAITOR TO STYGIA SO RICHLY DESERVES?

JUSTICE?!
THERE IS NO JUSTICE IN STYGIA, THOTH-AMON --
-- NOT SO LONG AS YOU REMAIN THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE!
LOOK WHAT YOU DID TO KHARANTUS, MY BELOVED FATHER -- WHOSE ONLY CRIME WAS TO LOVE YOU AS ANOTHER SON!
YOU HAD HIS MIND DESTROYED, ON THE FRAUDULENT CHARGE OF SET-WORSHIP -- AN ABHORRENCE YOU PRACTICE OPENLY NOW!
AND LOOK WHAT YOU HAVE DONE TO OUR NATION. YOU PLUNGED STYGIA INTO WAR -- WAR ON OUR BORDERS, OUR SANDS, OUR WATERS --
-- ALL TO BLEED THE COUNTRY OF MONEY, STRENGTH, LIVES -- THAT IT MIGHT HAVE NOWHERE TO TURN BUT YOUR FOUL GOD.
I DID NOT SEEK OUT THIS TASK, THOTH-AMON, BUT I HAVE ACCEPTED IT. YOU HAVE CHOKED THE BREATH FROM STYGIA, WITH LIES AND ARTIFICES.
YOUR THREAT MUST BE ENDED, BEFORE THE COUNTRY DIES ENTIRELY.
'TIS YOU WHO ARE THE TRAITOR HERE, THOTH-AMON, NOT I!
WELL. I AM QUITE PUT IN MY PLACE, AM I NOT?
BEFORE THE PRIESTS AND PEOPLE OF MEMPHIA, YOUR HATE-FILLED WORDS CONDEMN YOU. STILL, IT IS NOT FOR ME TO PRONOUNCE SENTENCE UPON YOU.
NAY, THAT HONOR --
-- FALLS TO ANOTHER.

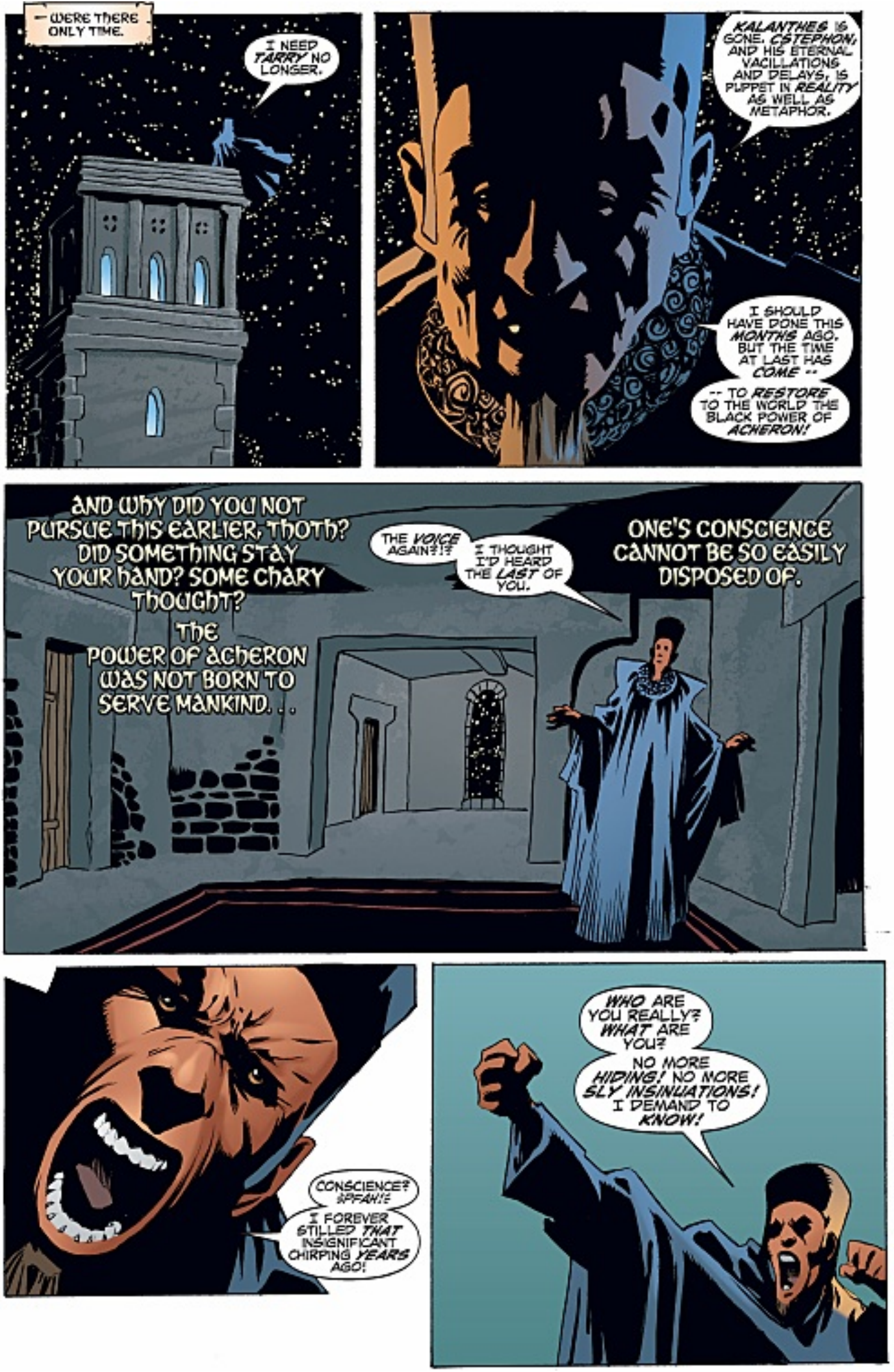
ME?
I MUST DO IT? BUT, NOBLE THOTH --
I AM SORRY, YOUR MAJESTY.
BUT THE CRIME IS GREAT, AND THE PEOPLE MUST HEAR IT FROM THE RULING HOUSE. THEY MUST SEE THAT THIS IS NO MERE INFRACTION...
AND KALANTHES WAS YOUR FRIEND AS WELL AS MINE, AND YOU CANNOT BRING YOURSELF TO IT, HM? I UNDERSTAND.
YOU ARE BOUND BY THE LAW, BUT I AM KING. WHAT I SPEAK IS LAW.
THE SENTENCE OUGHT TO BE DEATH. BUT AFTER ALL KALANTHES HAS MEANT TO US BOTH -- I THINK I SHALL EXILE HIM INSTEAD, NEVER TO RETURN SOUTH OF THE STYX.
WHAT? BUT, KING OSTEPHON, I--
NO NEED TO THANK ME, GOOD THOTH-AMON.
IT IS BEST THIS WAY, FOR ALL OF US.
BUT, YOUR MAJESTY, KALANTHES HAS COMMITTED --
I'VE HEARD ENOUGH, PRIEST. AM I KING, OR AM I NOT? I CHOOSE MERCY.
THE DECISION IS MADE.
AS YOU WISH, MY KING. YOUR WORD, AS YOU SAY, IS LAW.
BUT IN THAT CASE, BEFORE WE RETURN TO THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, THERE IS SOMETHING YOU NEED TO SEE.

THUS—
ARE Y-YOU CERTAIN THIS IS NECESSARY, THOTH-AMON?
I'D INTENDED TO SHOW YOU THIS EVENTUALLY, MY KING --
-- BUT RECENT EVENTS MAKE THIS VITAL, I THINK.
THERE, YOUR HIGHNESS? DO YOU SEE?
IN THAT ALCOVE -- A GIFT FOR YOU!
FOR ME?
IT HAS RESTED HERE IN THE OLD CATACOMBS FOR CENTURIES, LOST AND FORGOTTEN. IT AWAITED ONLY THE TIME AND THE MAN. I PRAY YOU, MY KING --
-- OPEN IT.
W-WELL, IF YOU INSI --
AND THUS WAS THE TERRIBLE CHEST OPENED. THUS ITS UNSPEAKABLE CONTENTS RELEASED.
AAAAA
AND THUS WAS KING OSTEPHON, RELUCTANT KING OF STYGIA, FOREVER LOST.

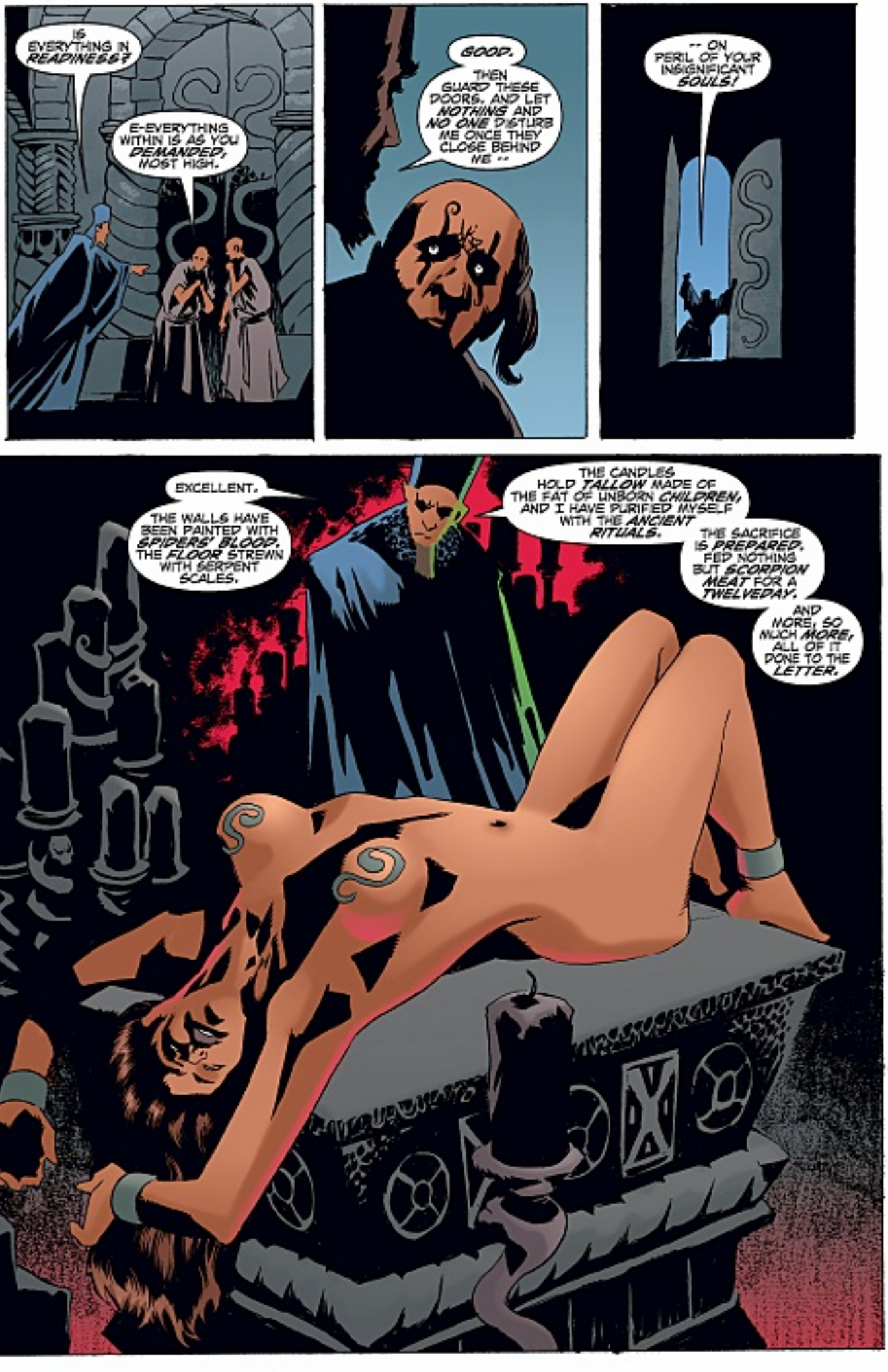
THE HAPLESS OSTEPHON SLEPT AS ONE DEAD, FOR TWO DAYS AND TWO NIGHTS. AND FINALLY, ON THE THIRD DAY, WHEN THE SUN-GOD'S ANGRY EYE REACHED ITS ZENITH—
AND HAVE YOU MADE YOUR DECISION, MIGHTY KING OSTEPHON?
WILL KALANTHES' PUNISHMENT BE BANISHMENT OR DEATH?
I HAVE -- I HAVE DECIDED.
HE IS A TRAITOR TO THE CROWN.
THE SENTENCE IS DEATH.
YOU HEARD THE KING. THESE PROCEEDINGS ARE AT AN END.
LET THE PUNISHMENT BE CARRIED OUT -- IMMEDIATELY.
AND WAS IT SORROW FOR HIS SON'S SAD FATE, OR MERELY DUST THAT BROUGHT A TEAR TO THE EYE OF THE MIND-SHATTERED KHARANTUS? I WILL NEVER KNOW.
BUT THERE WAS LITTLE DUST.
YOU HAVE NOT HEARD THE LAST OF THIS, MONSTER. THE PEOPLE WILL --
YOU PUT ENTIRELY TOO MUCH TRUST IN PEOPLE, OLD FRIEND. YOU ALWAYS HAVE.
AT THE VERY LEAST, HOWEVER, I CAN BE CONFIDENT --
-- THAT WE HAVE HEARD THE LAST OF YOU.
AND THAT WILL TEACH OSTEPHON TO MEDDLE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MY CITY --!

IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE, IN A MISERABLE COPSE FAR FROM GRIM MEMPHIA'S GATES—
TOC
TOC
TOC
NOT A SCREAM. NOT SO MUCH AS A WHIMPER. YOU'RE A STRONG MAN, PRIEST. SORRY THIS TASK FELL TO ME.
YOU'RE SORRY? FOR A TRAITOR?
I'M FROM MEMPHIA, UNLIKE YOU. THAT MAN CURED MY SISTER OF BOILS, FED ALL ON MY STREET DURING FAMINE.
POOR BASTARD. THAT'S NOT A GOOD WAY TO DIE.
AYE, BUT WHAT IS?

—AND KALANTHES GASPED FOR AIR, TO FILL HIS STRAINING LUNGS, AND PRAYED FOR STRENGTH, TO HOLD BACK THE AGONIZED SCREAMS IN HIS THROAT.
THE SOLDIER HAD REMEMBERED THINGS THOTH WOULD WANT FORGOTTEN.
HE WOULD TELL THE STORY, KALANTHES KNEW. THE STORY OF A KIND MAN, A HELPFUL MAN. A MAN WHO STOOD AGAINST THEIR COUNTRY'S HARSH MASTERS—
—AND DIED FOR IT, IN SILENCE AND IN FAITH TO A GOD OF PEACE.
MIGHT THE STORY SPREAD? MIGHT IT TAKE ROOT IN THE POOR QUARTERS OF MEMPHIA, SPREAD WITH THE SOLDIERY, UNTIL IT GREW INTO THE REBELLION THOTH SOUGHT TO KILL?
AYE, IT MIGHT—


— WERE THERE ONLY TIME.
I NEED TARRY NO LONGER.
KALANTHES IS GONE, CSTEPHON; AND HIS ETERNAL VACILLATIONS AND DELAYS, IS PUPPET IN REALITY AS WELL AS METAPHOR.
I SHOULD HAVE DONE THIS MONTHS AGO. BUT THE TIME AT LAST HAS COME --
-- TO RESTORE TO THE WORLD THE BLACK POWER OF ACHERON!
AND WHY DID YOU NOT PURSUE THIS EARLIER, THOTH? DID SOMETHING STAY YOUR HAND? SOME CHARY THOUGHT?
THE POWER OF ACHERON WAS NOT BORN TO SERVE MANKIND. . .
THE VOICE AGAIN?!?
I THOUGHT I'D HEARD THE LAST OF YOU.
ONE'S CONSCIENCE CANNOT BE SO EASILY DISPOSED OF.
CONSCIENCE? SPFAH!?
I FOREVER STILLED THAT INSIGNIFICANT CHIRPING YEARS AGO!
WHO ARE YOU REALLY? WHAT ARE YOU?
NO MORE HIDING! NO MORE SLY INSINUATIONS! I DEMAND TO KNOW!

YOU! IS IT YOU, OLD MAN?!
IS THERE MORE REMAINING BEHIND YOUR DULLED EYES THAN WE WERE LED TO BELIEVE?
SPEAK TO ME, DOLT!
IF YOU HAVE THE POWER TO SPEAK BEHIND MY BACK, HAVE THE COURAGE TO SPEAK TO MY FACE!
SPEAK, CURSE YOU!
THOK
=FEH!=
WHY AM I WASTING MY TIME WITH YOU? I OWN SANDALS WITH MORE INTELLIGENCE!
YOU NEED NOT DO IT, THOTH. YOU CAN STILL --
STOP MOCKING ME! I'LL SHOW YOU WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE!
I'LL SHOW THE WHOLE CURSED WORLD!


IS EVERYTHING IN READINESS?
E-EVERYTHING WITHIN IS AS YOU DEMANDED, MOST HIGH.
GOOD.
THEN GUARD THESE DOORS. AND LET NOTHING AND NO ONE DISTURB ME ONCE THEY CLOSE BEHIND ME --
-- ON PERIL OF YOUR INSIGNIFICANT SOULS!
EXCELLENT.
THE WALLS HAVE BEEN PAINTED WITH SPIDERS' BLOOD. THE FLOOR STREWN WITH SERPENT SCALES.
THE CANDLES HOLD TALLOW MADE OF THE FAT OF UNBORN CHILDREN, AND I HAVE PURIFIED MYSELF WITH THE ANCIENT RITUALS.
THE SACRIFICE IS PREPARED. FED NOTHING BUT SCORPION MEAT FOR A TWELVEDAY.
AND MORE, SO MUCH MORE, ALL OF IT DONE TO THE LETTER.

P-PLEASE, MILORD, I HAVE DONE NOTHING.
I BEG YOU -- DO NOT HURT ME! GRANT ME LIFE!
LIFE, MY CHILD?
I WILL GRANT YOU MORE THAN THAT. I AM GOING TO MAKE YOU IMMORTAL.
PLEASE, MY MOTHER IS ILL -- MY POOR SISTERS NEED --
YOUR SISTERS NEED NOTHING, MY CHILD. NO MORE THAN YOUR MOTHER, WHO PRECEDED THEM INTO THE HEREAFTER.
THE SACRIFICE MUST BE UNTETHERED TO WORLDLY LIFE.
NOW, PERMIT ME TO SET THE STAGE...
AND NOW, BY THE COLD GRACE OF ALMIGHTY SET, FATHER TO SERPENTS, FATHER OF PAIN, WHOSE BLOOD BURNS LIKE BRIMSTONE IN MY VEINS...
...WE BEGIN!
AND SOFTLY AT FIRST, BUT INCREASING IN URGENCY AND PASSION—

—THE FORMER STREET THIEF, NOW HIGH PRIEST OF SET, BEGAN TO CHANT—
LAJERAI! LAJERAI! LAJERAMA AKERON!
LAJERAI KAA! SET! KAA!
—UTTERING WORDS HEARD UPON THE EARTH ONLY THRICE SINCE THE RISE OF MAN—
SET! AIUSA! SET! AIUSA!
COME, GIRL! CHANT! CHANT WITH ME!
P-PLEASE -- NO!
CHANT, CURSE YOU!
THIS IS THE MOMENT BOTH OF OUR LIVES HAVE BEEN BUILDING TO!
CHANT!
AKERON! SET! AKERON! KAA! AKERON! --
NOOOOO!
-- TUS!
SHNKK

THE ECHOES RANG IN THE CHAMBER. THOTH WAITED. THE ECHOES DIED. THOTH WAITED. BUT ALL THAT COULD BE HEARD IN THE DANK, DARK CHAMBER—
— WAS THE DRIP, DRIP, DRIP OF BLOOD.
WHAT -- NOTHING?
I DID ALL AS I WAS *TOLD*. I PERFORMED THE RITUAL WITH INFINITE *PRECISION*. AND I GET *NOTHING*?!?
WHERE IS THE *POWER* THAT WAS PROMISED ME?
WHERE IS THE *GLORY* OF ANCIENT *ACHERON*?
LOOK ABOUT THEE, FAITHFUL PRIEST --
EH?
-- AND ALL WILL SSSTAND REVEALED TO THEE!

SSSPEAK, THOTH-CALLED-AMON. AND TELL ME --
-- WHY HASSST THOU SSSUMMONED XALTOTUN, FIRSSST OF ACHERON?
WHY? I SEEK POWER, WOMAN.
I MUST WIELD THE GLORIOUS POWER OF ACHERON -- REBUILD ITS EMPIRE HERE ON EARTH, WITH MYSELF AT ITS HEAD!
AHHH.
SSSADLY FOR YOU, PRIESSST, I AM NOT WOMAN, NOT ANY LONGER. AND THE POWER OF ACHERON ISSS NOT EASSSILY COMMANDED.
BUT THOU HASSST NOT BROUGHT ME FORTH IN VAIN.
THOUGH THOU SSSHALT NOT POSSSESSS THE POWER OF ALMIGHTY ACHERON...
...SSSTILL SSSHALT THOU KNOW ITSSS EXALTED TOUCH!
WHAT -- ?

CANSSST THOU FEEL IT, WARM-BLOOD?
CANSSST THOU FEEL XALTOTUN'S POWER WITHIN THEE, FULFILLING THEE?
NO, I...
...I DO. I DO!
IN MY VEINS, MY BONES, MY FLESH! SUCH -- IT IS AMAZING! IT FEELS--
-- EH?
M-MY HAND! WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?
SSSTRUGGLE NOT, MY CHILD. LET XALTOTUN POSSSESSS THEE.
THHOU SSSHALT BE MOSSST HONORED OF SSSAD MANKIND -- FOR THOU SSSHALT SSSERVE ASSS HISSS VESSSEL!
V-VESSEL?
NO!
AND THOTH BEGAN TO PULL BACK-- TO RESIST--

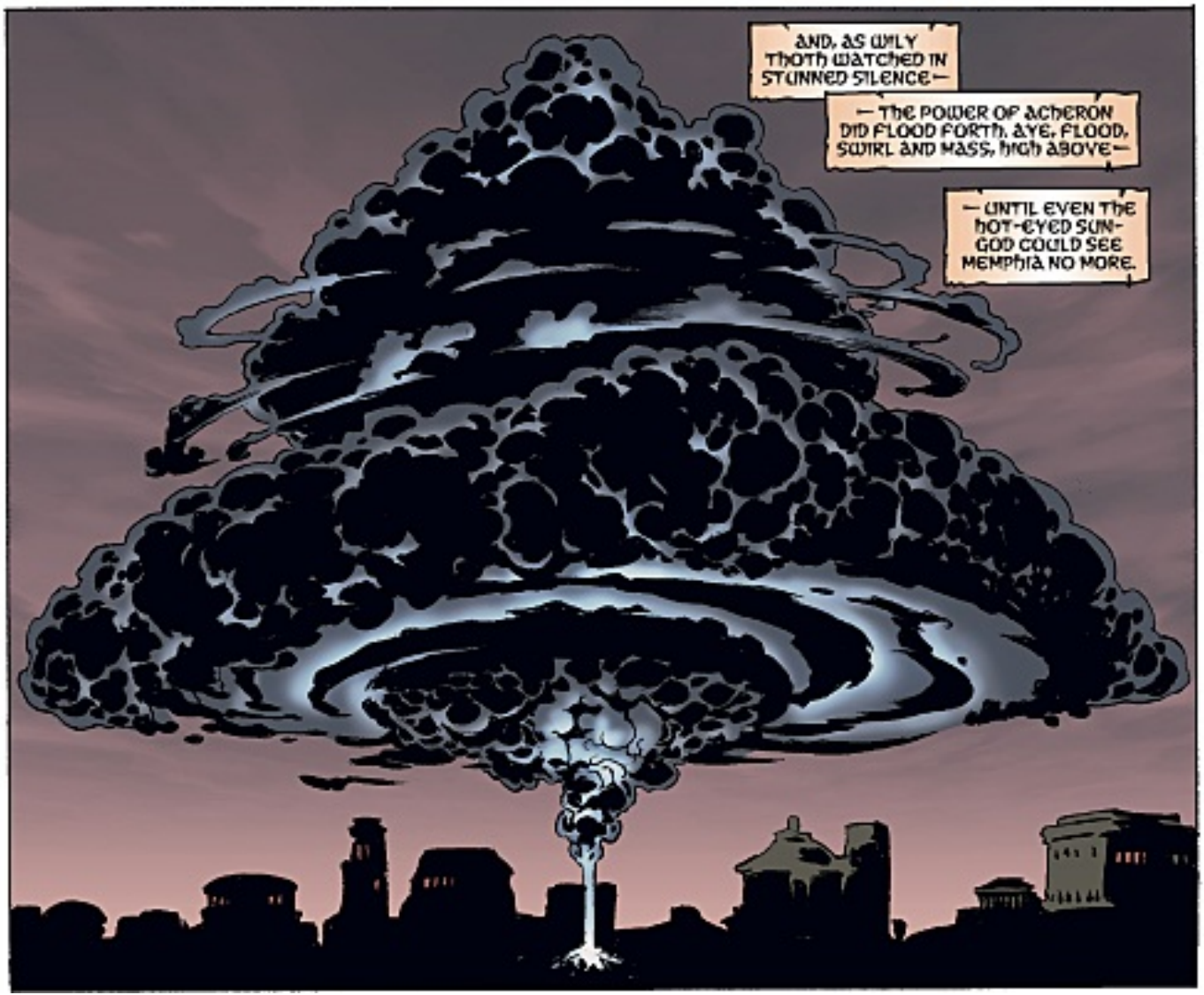
— BUT POWER SEETHED WITHIN HIM, SEETHED, AND SEIZED HIS EYES—
—AND HE SAW—
HE SAW CYCLOPEAN CITIES OF COLD AND CHEERLESS STONE, LOOMING HIGHER THAN ANY SPIRES MAN HAD THOUGHT TO BUILD.
HE SAW STYGIA, SHEM, OPHIR, ARGOS, SWEPT AWAY, CRUSHED BENEATH THE POWER ARISEN.
HE HEARD THE DEATH-SCREAMS OF MEN, AND SAW THE FLAYED BODIES OF KINGS AND EMPERORS SPRAWLED BENEATH A BLACK AND ROILING SKY.
HE SAW MANKIND ENSLAVED, TOILING BENEATH THE LASH— MEN OLD AND BENT BEFORE THEIR TIME, FORGOTTEN WHERE THEY FELL, REPLACED IN THE YOKE BY THEIR SONS, AND THEIR SONS' SONS—
—ALL TO LIFT MONUMENTS TO A SAVAGE RACE WHICH HAD ONCE BEEN AS GODS TO MEN, AND NOW WERE GODS AGAIN.
AND ABOVE IT ALL ABOVE IT ALL, OBSERVING THE MISERY AND REVELING IN IT—

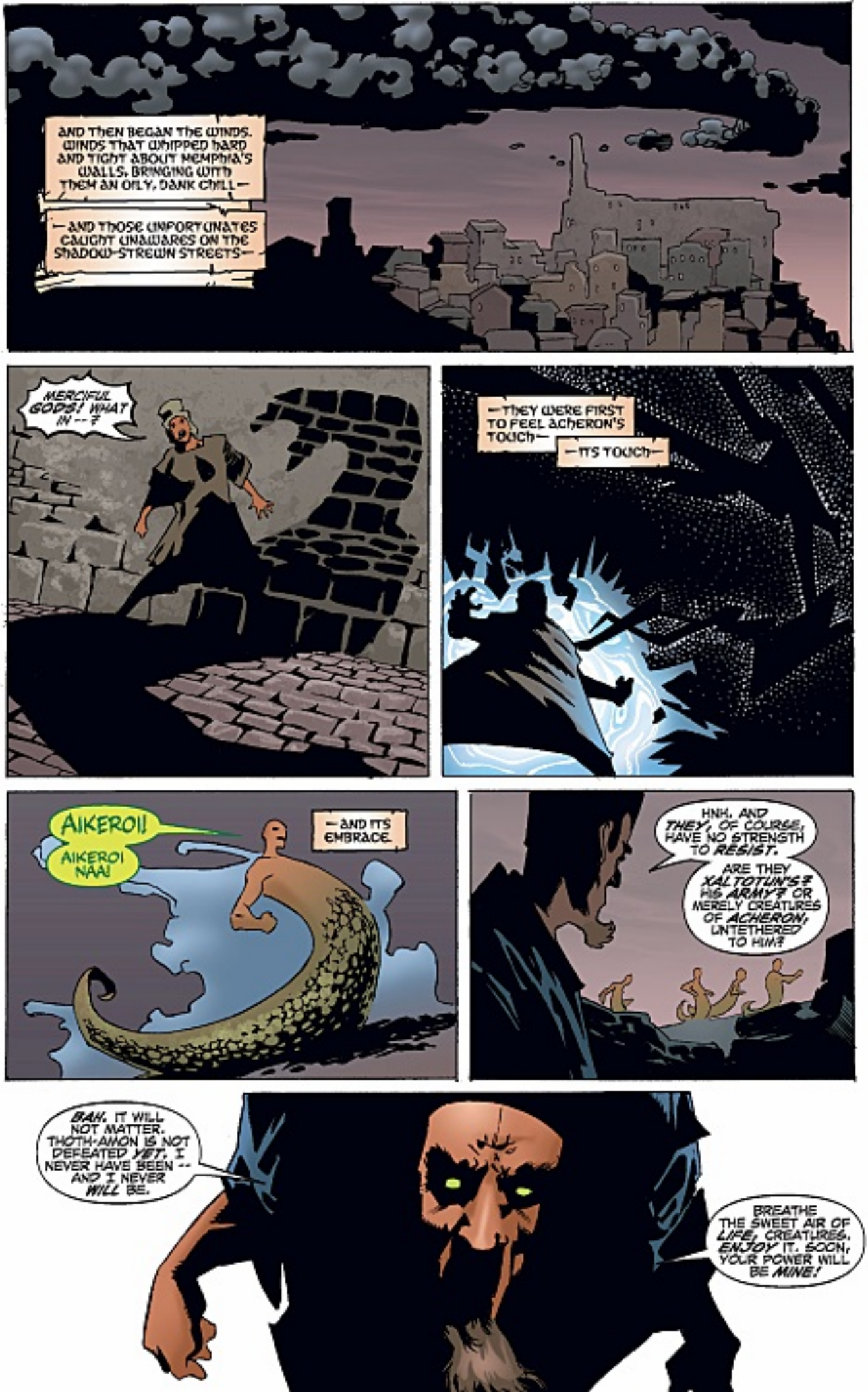
AND OH, IT FELT GOOD. DARKLY, HUNGRILY GOOD. A HUNGER THAT WOULD SLAKE ITSELF AND SLAKE ITSELF ON FLESH AND BLOOD AND SCREAMS AND YET NEVER BE FULLY SATED.
IT FELT—

NO! I WILL NOT BE FOOLED! THOTH-AMON IS NO VESSEL! I WILL BE MASTER! MASTER!
HSSS!
THOU ART THE OPENER, WARMBLOOD!
THE GATEWAY IS BOUND TO THEE! WILLING OR UNWILLING, THEN --
-- VESSSEL THOU SSSHALT BE!
NEVER! I DD NOT RAISE ACHERON SO THAT I COULD SERVE ACHERON!
I RAISED ACHERON SO THAT IT COULD SERVE ME!
THEN SSSUFFER FOR THY ARROGANCE!
SSSUFF-- AAGGHH!
EH? MY RING -- HURTS YOU?
THE BLACK RING OF SSSET!
IT YET SSSURVIVESSS --!

THEN LIKE THEE, THE BLACK RING MUSSST BE OURSSS!
YOU ARE FORCEFUL, WITCH -- I ADMIRE THAT.
BUT I ALREADY DIED ONCE TO ATTAIN THIS RING.
THOK
I SHALL NOT DO SO AGAIN.
AS EVER, THOTH-AMON WINS.
NO, THOTH-CALLED-AMON.
THOU HASSST LOSSST.

THE GATEWAY LIES OPEN. AND ACHERON WILL TAKE YOUR WORLD.
YOU COULD HAVE KNOWN POWER UNENDING. BUT IF YOU REFUSE XALTOTUN --
-- YOU WILL DIE AS JUST ANOTHER SLAVE.


AND, AS WILY THOTH WATCHED IN STUNNED SILENCE—
— THE POWER OF ACHERON DID FLOOD FORTH. AYE. FLOOD. SWIRL AND MASS. HIGH ABOVE—
— UNTIL EVEN THE HOT-EYED SUN-GOD COULD SEE MEMPHIA NO MORE.


AND THEN BEGAN THE WINDS. WINDS THAT WHIPPED HARD AND TIGHT ABOUT MEMPHIS'S WALLS, BRINGING WITH THEM AN OILY, DANK CHILL—
—AND THOSE UNFORTUNATES CAUGHT UNAWARES ON THE SHADOW-STREWN STREETS—
MERCIFUL GODS! WHAT IN --?
—THEY WERE FIRST TO FEEL ACHERON'S TOUCH—
—ITS TOUCH—
AIKEROI!
AIKEROI NAA!
—AND ITS EMBRACE.
HNH. AND THEY, OF COURSE, HAVE NO STRENGTH TO RESIST.
ARE THEY XALTOTUN'S? HIS ARMY? OR MERELY CREATURES OF ACHERON, UNTETHERED TO HIM?
BAH. IT WILL NOT MATTER. THOTH-AMON IS NOT DEFEATED YET. I NEVER HAVE BEEN -- AND I NEVER WILL BE.
BREATHE THE SWEET AIR OF LIFE, CREATURES. ENJOY IT. SOON, YOUR POWER WILL BE MINE!

DO THE GODS SCHEME AND STRIVE LIKE MEN, AS SOME SAY? OR DO THEY SHAKE THEIR HEADS AND RUE OUR FOOLISHNESS?
IN THE TEMPLE, THOTH SLUNK AND SPIED, SEEKING ADVANTAGE. IN THE HILLS PAST THE SOUTH GATES—
WAR-LEADER, LOOK! LOOK TO MEMPHIA!
CITIES. PACK ENOUGH FOOLS INTO ONE PLACE, AND THEY FESTER IN THEIR OWN FILTH, ROTTING AND SOUR. AND THEY BREW MONSTERS. I DO NOT KNOW WHAT THAT IS --
-- BUT I KNOW IT IS BORN OF THE CITY, AND I KNOW I WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH IT.
KERIM TAKE ALL SUCH PLACES!
WE HAVE FOUGHT ALONGSIDE GOOD MEN, SEEKING TO CHECK SUCH FOUL THINGS.
BUT FROM NOW ON, I SAY AKKAD AND THE DANU SHOULD RIDE ANOTHER PATH.
LET US SEEK THE CLEAN AIR OF THE HILLS, AND THE WATER OF MOUNTAIN STREAMS. A TRUE MAN NEEDS LITTLE ELSE.
THESE CIVILIZED MEN CAN KILL EACH OTHER OFF, FOR ALL I --
AH, WAR-LEADER?

KALANTHES!
AKKAD...MY FRIEND...
THERE IS... IS GREAT DANGER! I MUST TELL YOU... BEFORE I DIE...
I'VE SEEN IT, PRIEST.
QUICKLY, BROTHERS--BRING TOOLS!
GENTLY, NOW!
HE HAS ALREADY SUFFERED MUCH!
I THOUGHT... ALL WAS LOST...I THOUGHT...
DON'T TRY TO SPEAK.
JUST DRINK, MY FRIEND, AND REST.
B-BUT YOU WERE...ON YOUR WAY...TO MEMPHIA...
WHAT MIRACLE OF THIS...BROUGHT YOU THIS WAY... INSTEAD...?
NO MIRACLE, KALANTHES.
WE ABANDONED OUR JOURNEY -- AT THE SIGHT OF THAT.

'TWILL NOT BE LONG BEFORE THAT ENCHANTED STORM DESTROYS YOUR PRECIOUS MEMPHIA AND ALL WHO DWELL WITHIN.
WE'D BE WISE TO PUT MORE DISTANCE BETWEEN US AND THE CITY WHILE WE STILL CAN!
BY THE GRACE OF IBIS... WHAT HATH THOTH-AMON WROUGHT NOW?
THANK YOU, MY FRIEND, FOR RESCUING ME... FOR ALL YOUR EFFORTS ON MY BEHALF.
MAY ALMIGHTY IBIS WATCH OVER YOU ALWAYS.
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?
I CANNOT GO WITH YOU, AKKAD -- NOT NOW.
MEMPHIA NEEDS ME NOW MORE THAN EVER.
HAS THE SUN STOLEN YOUR MIND ENTIRELY, PRIEST? WHAT YOU'RE SUGGESTING IS SHEER SUICIDE.
WHY, A MOMENT AGO, YOU COULD BARELY SPEAK, LET ALONE STAND!
IBIS SUSTAINS ME. AND I HAVE NO CHOICE.
IF THIS EVIL IS NOT CHECKED IN MEMPHIA, NOWHERE IN THE WORLD WILL BE SAFE FROM ITS TERRIBLE TOUCH. THE MOUNTAINS, THE SEAS -- NOWHERE.
I THANK YOU FOR YOUR AID, AKKAD.
AND I WISH YOU LUCK.

HE HAD SOUGHT THE ARCHIVES, HAD THOTH-AMON. SEEKING KNOWLEDGE, SPELLS TO USE AGAINST THE CREATURES OF ACHERON.
HE HAD NOT REACHED THEM.
SO! XALTOTUN'S BLACK CLOUD NOW TURNS EVEN MY FELLOW PRIESTS AGAINST ME? IT IS AN IRONIC WORLD, INDEED!
BUT I WILL NOT FALL SO EASILY. STAY BACK, FOOLS!
BY THE BLACK RING OF SET, I ABJURE YOU TO --
SSSSS--AAGGHHH
EH?
OF COURSE -- THE BLACK RING!
LIKE XALTOTUN, IT TOO DRAWS ITS TERRIBLE POWER FROM THE DARK GOD SET. AND WITH ACHERON AWAKENING, ITS POWER INCREASES.
NO WONDER XALTOTUN'S CREATURE FEARED IT. WITH THIS RING I MIGHT HUMBLE XALTOTUN -- EVEN COMMAND HIM!
BUT I MUST STRIKE SWIFTLY!
EVEN NOW, ACHERON SEEKS TO CLAIM ALL AROUND ME FOR ITS OWN!
AND MY STRENGTH IS ROOTED IN MEMPHIA. IF IT FALLS --!

AND THUS DID ARROGANT THOTH-AMON SUMMON INNER STRENGTH, GIRDING IT ABOUT HIM ALMOST LIKE A WARRIOR'S ARMOR.
THE POWER OF GUILE—
—OF YEARS OF HATE—
—HE GATHERED HIS MIGHT TO HIM—
—AND REACHED UPWARD—UPWARD—
—INTO THE ROILING MASS OF BLACKNESS ABOVE, INTO THE HEART OF ACHERON'S NASCENT POWER. AND HE REACHED— THROUGH THE RING, THROUGH HIS HATE—
—HE SENT HIS POWER UPWARD, CARRYING ONE MESSAGE—
"I AM THOTH-AMON! I AM THOTH-AMON OF STYGIA! YOU WILL BOW TO ME! BOW— OR I WILL CRUSH YOU, LIKE A DRIED AND EMPTY BEETLE SHELL!"
AND YET, STILL DID THOTH-AMON FEEL A FAINT TICKLE—
—A TICKLE SO GOOD, SO SWEET, SO ENTICING—
"LET YOURSELF GO," IT WHISPERED. "LET THE POWER TAKE YOU— LET THE PLEASURE OF IT TAKE YOUR SPIRIT LIKE A CORK IN THE OCEAN SURF—"

LIES.
YOU SPEAK LIES, DAMN YOU-- LIES!
POWER IS NOT POWER IF IT IS IN THRALL TO ANOTHER!
THERE ARE RULERS -- AND THERE ARE SLAVES! NO OTHERS!
I HAVE BEEN A SLAVE!
I AM THOTH-AMON! I WILL RULE!
I -- WILL --
EH? THAT LIGHT -- ?
IBIS'S SHELTERING WING. SURELY YOU RECOGNIZE IT.
YOU?
BUT -- I KILLED YOU!
YOU TRIED, YOUNG THOTH. INDEED YOU TRIED.
AND YET STILL WILL THE FORGIVING LIGHT OF BLESSED IBIS SHIELD YOU.

YOU ARE WOUNDED, KALANTHES.
YOUR HANDS HAVE BEEN HEALED, BUT --
YOU HAVE UNLEASHED HELL, THOTH-AMON. THE TEMPLE IS RINGED WITH DEMONS.
DID YOU THINK I SIMPLY WALKED IN?
DEMONS? I HAD THOUGHT -- JUST THE PRIESTS --
HALF THE CITY, THOTH-AMON. MORE EVERY PASSING MOMENT.
AND WE TWO ARE ALL THAT STANDS AGAINST THEM?
NAY -- NOT WE TWO ALONE.
BY THE GRACE OF ISIS --
"-- I WAS ACCOMPANIED BY FRIENDS. EVEN NOW, THEY HOLD BACK MOST OF THE FORCES ASSAULTING THIS COURTYARD."
STRIKE, BROTHERS OF THE DANU!
STRIKE AS THOUGH YOUR VERY SOULS DEPEND UPON IT --

HHHSSSSSS
-- FOR, IN TRUTH, THEY DO!
THWKK
AND THE WARRIORS OF THE DANU FOUGHT WITH LEGENDARY FURY. THEY FOUGHT, AND THEY DIED.
AGGHH!
HHHSSSSSS
THE DANU -- THEY ARE BANDITS, REBELS! WHY WOULD THEY--?
AND THOTH-AMON POURED HIS STRENGTH, HIS ANGER, HIS HUNGER TO RULE, UPWARD, EVER UPWARD, AND KALANTHES SHIELDED HIM.
THIS IS ALL THE WORLD'S PERIL. ALL THE WORLD'S FIGHT.
AKKAD SEES THAT, EVEN IF YOU DO NOT.
NOW USE THE RESPITE WE HAVE GAINED YOU, PRIEST OF LIES. USE IT SWIFTLY. CLOSE THE GATEWAY OF POWER, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE --
-- AND SEND WHAT YOU HAVE SUMMONED STRAIGHT BACK TO HELL!
CAST IT AWAY? POWER SUCH AS THIS?
ARE YOU A COMPLETE FOOL, KALANTHES? I HAVE NOT SCHEMED THIS LONG TO MERELY CAST THE PRIZE ASIDE.

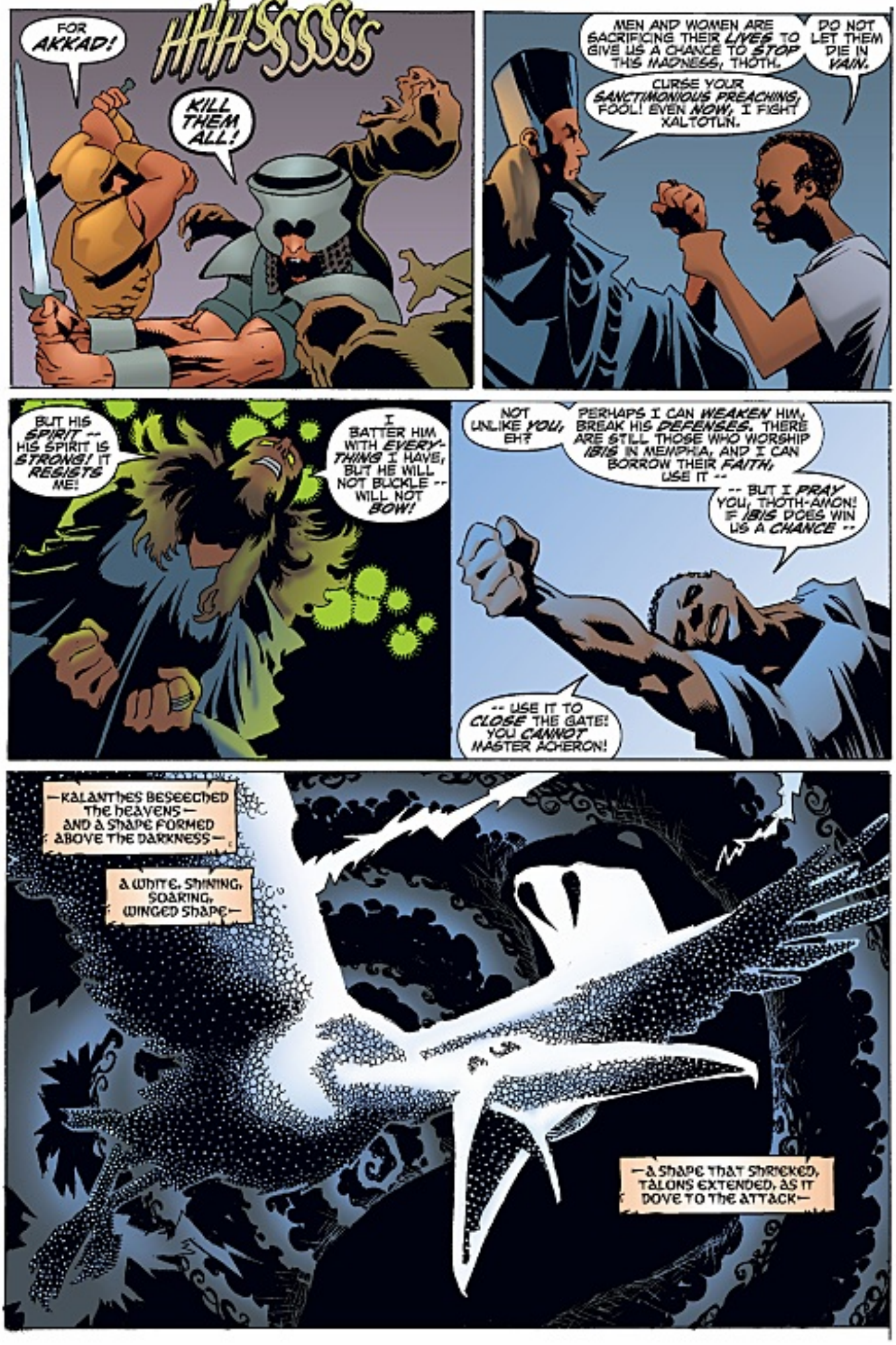
"THEN THE GATEWAY REMAINS OPEN," MUTTERED KALANTHES SADLY. "AND WITH EVERY MOMENT, IT OPENS WIDER."
AND IN THE SACRIFICIAL CHAMBER—
— THE WOMAN WAS NOT A FIT VESSEL. NOT FOR THE SPIRIT OF XALTOTUN. SHE WAS FRAIL, WEAK, A TEMPORARY HOME AT BEST.
WITH WET, SUCKING GASPS, THE THING THAT HAD ONCE BEEN HER DRAGGED ITSELF ACROSS THE CRACKED MARBLE FLOOR.
ITS RIBS CRACKED, SHIFTED, UNFOLDED.
ITS FLESH FLOWED, CHANGED.
IT SOUGHT—
IT SOUGHT THE OPENER. IT SOUGHT THE VESSEL THAT IT MUST HAVE.
THE VESSEL THAT COULD CONTAIN IT.
ITS BREATH BUBBLED IN ITS LUNGS. ITS BLOOD HISSED ON THE STONE, LEAVING A TRAIL ROUGH, PITTED AND SMOKING.
IT SOUGHT. IT SOUGHT—

IT FOUND.
TH-THOTH-AMONNN...
THE WOMAN -- ?
WOMAN?
IT LUNGED--

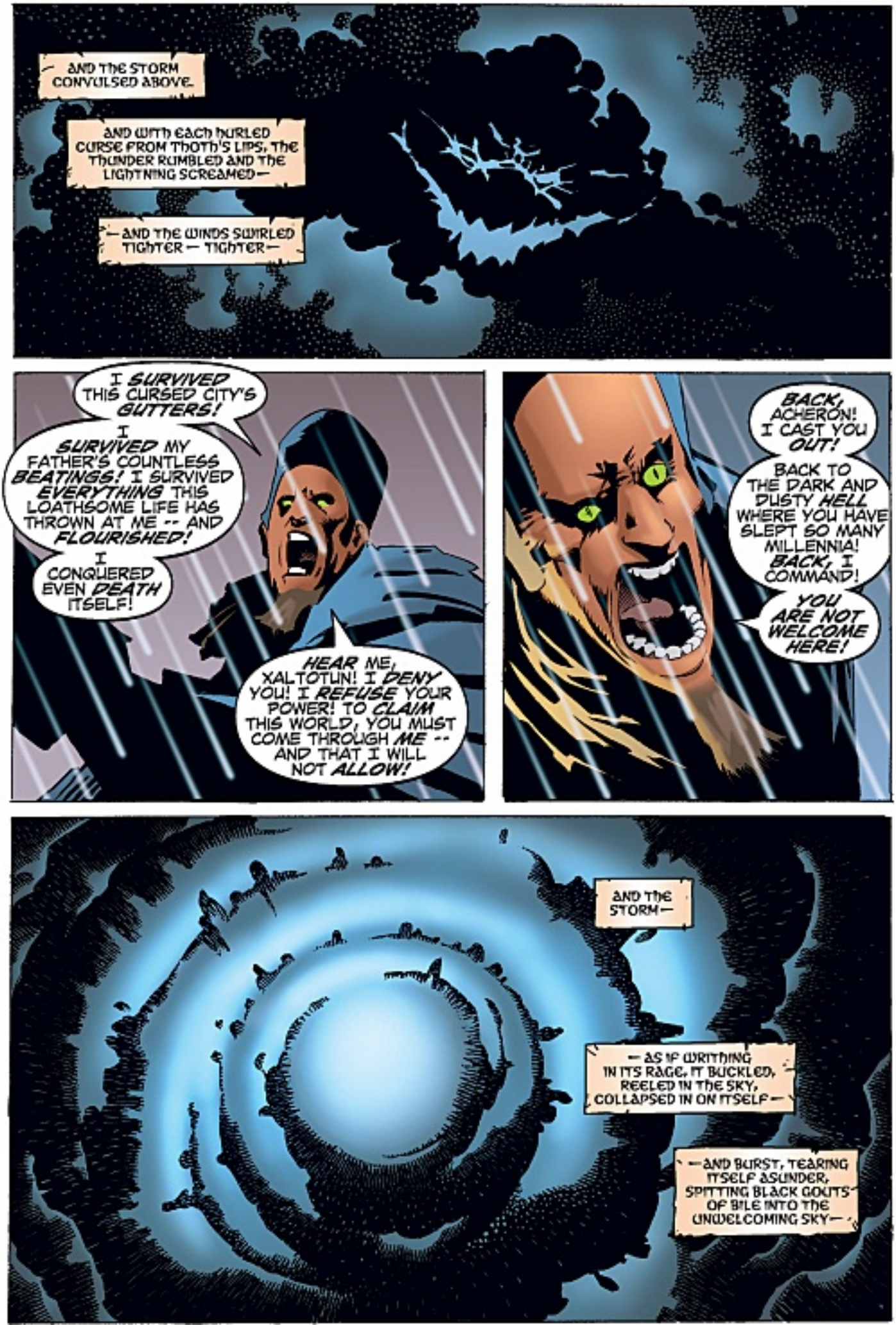
NO!
YOU WON'T --
AKKAD!

YOU... NOT OPENER YOU DIE...
WHATEVER YOU'RE DOING, KALANTHES -- DO IT! SWIFTLY!

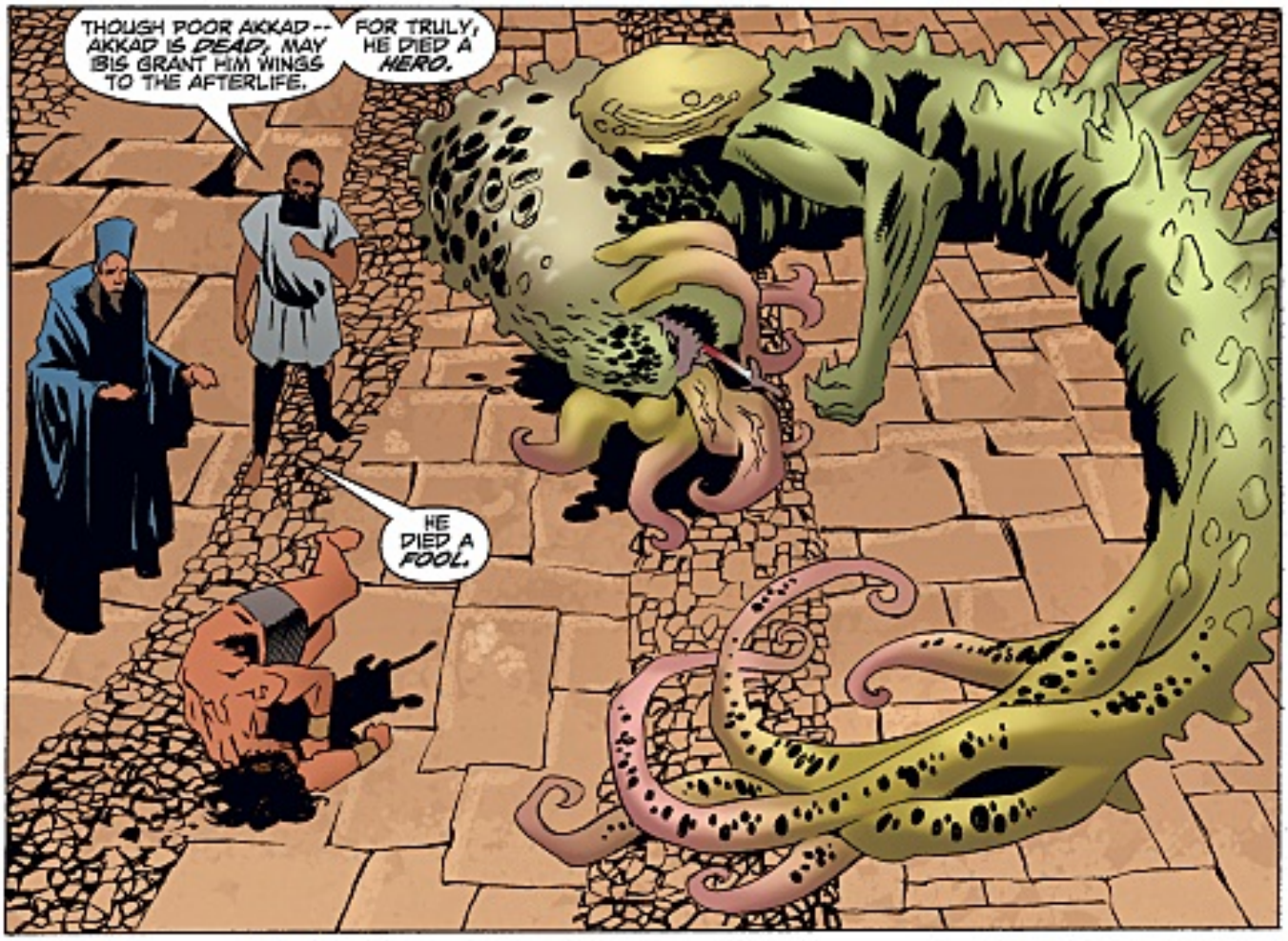
IT AMAZES ME, KALANTHES -- THAT FOOLS WILL FOLLOW YOU, EVEN INTO THE VERY JAWS OF DEATH!
NOTHING WORTH HAVING IS EVER WON WITHOUT SACRIFICE.
AKKAD FIGHTS FOR HIS WIVES, HIS CHILDREN -- NOT FOR ME.


FOR AKKAD!
HHHSSSSS
KILL THEM ALL!
MEN AND WOMEN ARE SACRIFICING THEIR LIVES TO GIVE US A CHANCE TO STOP THIS MADNESS, THOTH.
DO NOT LET THEM DIE IN VAIN.
CURSE YOUR SANCTIMONIOUS PREACHING, FOOL! EVEN NOW, I FIGHT XALTOTUN.
BUT HIS SPIRIT -- HIS SPIRIT IS STRONG! IT RESISTS ME!
I BATTER HIM WITH EVERYTHING I HAVE, BUT HE WILL NOT BUCKLE -- WILL NOT BOW!
NOT UNLIKE YOU, EH?
PERHAPS I CAN WEAKEN HIM, BREAK HIS DEFENSES. THERE ARE STILL THOSE WHO WORSHIP IBIS IN MEMPHIA, AND I CAN BORROW THEIR FAITH, USE IT --
-- BUT I PRAY YOU, THOTH-AMON! IF IBIS DOES WIN US A CHANCE --
-- USE IT TO CLOSE THE GATE! YOU CANNOT MASTER ACHERON!
—KALANTHES BESEECHED THE HEAVENS— AND A SHAPE FORMED ABOVE THE DARKNESS—
A WHITE, SHINING, SOARING, WINGED SHAPE—
—A SHAPE THAT SHRIEKED, TALONS EXTENDED, AS IT DOVE TO THE ATTACK—

—AND THE DARKNESS WRAPPED AROUND THE BIRD OF LIGHT— ENGULFING IT—
—AND THE SWIRLING CLOUDS CONVULSED, SHUDDERED, AS IF BEING TORN APART FROM WITHIN—
BUT—
IT WAS NOT ENOUGH, KALANTHES.
YOUR PRECIOUS IBIS HAS FAILED.
PERHAPS, THOTH...
...HAD YOU NOT ...SO THOROUGHLY STAMPED OUT HIS FOLL... FOLLOWERS...
...IT MIGHT HAVE ENDED...
...PFF... PFF...
DAMN. SPENT.
DOES IT COME DOWN TO THIS, THEN? ALL MY DARK DREAMS OF POWER, NEARLY WITHIN MY GRASP, AND YET...
YET I AM NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO...
NO!
I AM THOTH-AMON!
I AM THOTH!
AND I WILL NOT BE HUMBLED -- NOT BY MAN OR GOD!


AND THE STORM CONVULSED ABOVE.
AND WITH EACH HURLED CURSE FROM THOTH'S LIPS, THE THUNDER RUMBLED AND THE LIGHTNING SCREAMED—
—AND THE WINDS SWIRLED TIGHTER — TIGHTER—
I SURVIVED THIS CURSED CITY'S GUTTERS!
I SURVIVED MY FATHER'S COUNTLESS BEATINGS! I SURVIVED EVERYTHING THIS LOATHSOME LIFE HAS THROWN AT ME -- AND FLOURISHED!
I CONQUERED EVEN DEATH ITSELF!
HEAR ME, XALTOTUN! I DENY YOU! I REFUSE YOUR POWER! TO CLAIM THIS WORLD, YOU MUST COME THROUGH ME -- AND THAT I WILL NOT ALLOW!
BACK, ACHERON! I CAST YOU OUT!
BACK TO THE DARK AND DUSTY HELL WHERE YOU HAVE SLEPT SO MANY MILLENNIA! BACK, I COMMAND!
YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!
AND THE STORM—
—AS IF WRITHING IN ITS RAGE, IT BUCKLED, REELED IN THE SKY, COLLAPSED IN ON ITSELF—
—AND BURST, TEARING ITSELF ASUNDER, SPITTING BLACK GOUTS OF BILE INTO THE UNWELCOMING SKY—

AND IN TIME, DAYLIGHT RETURNED TO GRATEFUL MEMPHIS ONCE MORE—
—AND, RETURNING, RESTORED THOSE POSSESSED BY ACHERON'S SORCERIES ONCE MORE TO FRAGILE HUMANITY—
IT...IT IS DONE.
FOR NOW, AT LEAST, FAIR MEMPHIS YET ENDURES.


THOUGH POOR AKKAD--AKKAD IS DEAD, MAY BIS GRANT HIM WINGS TO THE AFTERLIFE.
FOR TRULY, HE DIED A HERO.
HE DIED A FOOL.

JUST ANOTHER BARBARIAN IMBECILE WHO PRATTLED OF FREEDOM AND THE STRENGTH OF ONE'S ARMS AND OTHER SUCH FOOLISHNESS.
HIS KIND WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND. THERE ARE MASTERS, AND THERE ARE SLAVES. THE ONLY QUESTION -- IS WHICH YOU SHALL BE.

AND WHAT OF ME, GREAT AND POWERFUL THOTH-AMON? WHAT NOW FOR ME?
BACK TO THAT CURSED TREE?

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING, THOTH-CALLED-AMON? OF WHAT ADVANTAGE THERE IS TO YOU? OF WHETHER HE IS A THREAT?
THINK, INSTEAD, OF WHAT YOU OWE HIM. OF WHAT HE HAS DONE FOR YOU, FOR THE WORLD. . .
I--

KLOP

IT WAS NOT A SERIOUS QUESTION, LIAR PRIEST. THOUGH I AM *SICKENED* THAT YOU HAD TO THINK ABOUT WHAT TO *ANSWER.*
I WILL TAKE MY POOR *FATHER* AND LEAVE THESE LANDS. BUT *YOU,* THOTH-AMON, SHOULD THINK ON WHAT *HAPPENED* HERE TODAY.
AND IF THERE IS A SINGLE SHRED OF *DECENCY* LEFT WITHIN YOUR BLACK HEART --
-- PERHAPS YOU WILL *LEARN* SOMETHING.
PERHAPS *NOT.*

WHAT WOULD THOTH HAVE CHOSEN?
WE MAY NEVER KNOW, GENTLE READER, AND PERHAPS — PERHAPS IT IS BETTER THAT WAY.
FOR, WEEKS LATER, IN THE HILLS BEYOND MEMPHIS—
LYXUS AND SHEM WAR OVER OUR NORTHEASTERN PROVINCES.

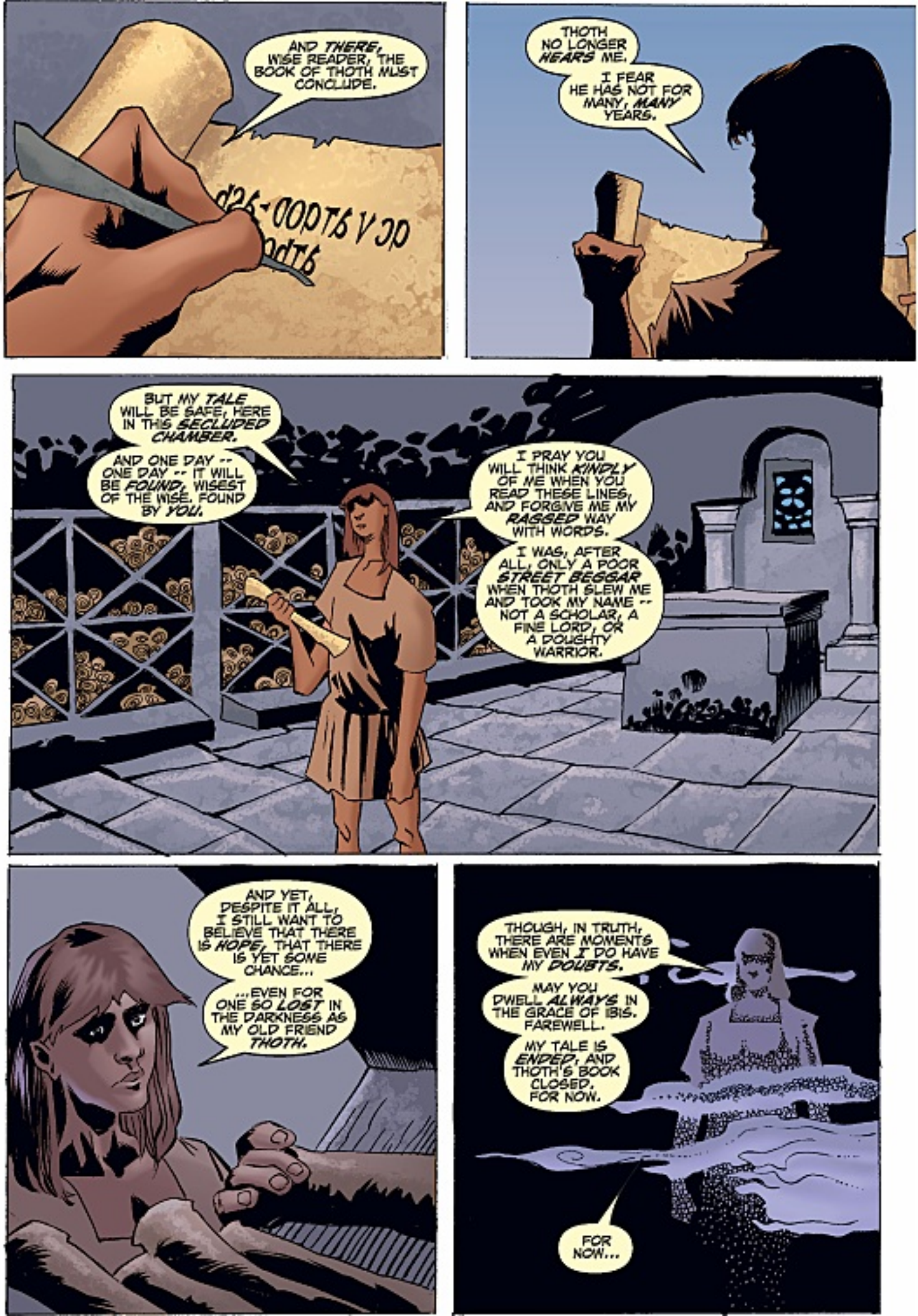
IF WE LET THEM, FOR NOW, AT LEAST, THEY WILL ATTEND TO EACH OTHER. BUT WE MUST LEAD PUNT TO STRIKE AT KHEM AS WELL.
WEAKEN THEM ENOUGH, AND THEY MIGHT FALL TO A SWIFT --
MOST HIGH, A MESSENGER. HE SAYS IT IS URGENT.

WELL? YOU INTERRUPT WEIGHTY MATTERS, GNAT. WHY DO YOU STAND THERE SHAKING LIKE A LEAF?
F-FORGIVE ME, MOST HIGH. I MEAN ONLY TO SERVE YOUR WILL.

I HAVE RETURNED AT LAST FROM THE PERSONAL QUEST YOU SENT ME ON THOSE MANY LONG WEEKS AGO.
QUEST...?
I'M A BUSY MAN, DOG. SPEAK!

I REGRET TO SAY, MOST HIGH, THE RESULTS... THEY WERE NOT GOOD.

THE YOUNG WOMAN YOU BADE ME FIND, THIS AYINA... SH-SHE AND HER ENTIRE FAMILY ARE DEAD. HER VILLAGE, ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF MEMPHIA --
-- IT WAS CONSUMED BY MYSTIC PLAGUE, A YEAR AGO. YOU REMEMBER? IT DESTROYED MUCH OF OUR GRAIN STORES?
NONE SURVIVED.
TT.
AND YOU BOTHER ME WITH THIS NONSENSE NOW -- WHY?
THE GRANARY FAILURES. YOU SHOWED KING OSTEPHON THAT, REMEMBER? WALKED HIM THROUGH IT MYSTICALLY?
A THOUSAND PARDONS, GREAT ONE! I MEANT --
-- MEANT NO --
PFF.
IDIOT. DID I EVEN SEND SOMEONE ON SUCH A POINTLESS ERRAND?
BUT YES -- THE ATTACKS DID DESTROY OUR GRAIN STORES, AND THERE WAS MUCH HUNGER. IT WEAKENED THE SUB-CLASSES, TURNED MORE TO SET.
PERHAPS I CAN USE THE MEMORY OF THEM. IF RUMORS SLIP THAT AKBITANA WAS BEHIND THEM...
YOU MADE THOSE ATTACKS, THOTH! YOUR SISTER -- YOUR FAMILY -- DO YOU NOT EVEN CARE?
I MUST BE CAUTIOUS... PLAN WELL...
STYGIA IS DAMAGED, ALMOST BROKEN. BUT I CAN SEE... SEE WHAT IT MIGHT BECOME...
AND THE VOICE SPOKE TO THOTH. PLEADED WITH HIM TO REMEMBER, TO THINK BACK TO WHAT ONCE HE WAS. BUT IF HE HEARD, HE MADE NO SIGN—


AND THERE, WISE READER, THE BOOK OF THOTH MUST CONCLUDE.
THOTH NO LONGER HEARS ME.
I FEAR HE HAS NOT FOR MANY, MANY YEARS.
BUT MY TALE WILL BE SAFE, HERE IN THIS SECLUDED CHAMBER.
AND ONE DAY -- ONE DAY -- IT WILL BE FOUND, WISEST OF THE WISE. FOUND BY YOU.
I PRAY YOU WILL THINK KINDLY OF ME WHEN YOU READ THESE LINES, AND FORGIVE ME MY RAGGED WAY WITH WORDS.
I WAS, AFTER ALL, ONLY A POOR STREET BEGGAR WHEN THOTH SLEW ME AND TOOK MY NAME -- NOT A SCHOLAR, A FINE LORD, OR A DOUGHTY WARRIOR.
AND YET, DESPITE IT ALL, I STILL WANT TO BELIEVE THAT THERE IS HOPE, THAT THERE IS YET SOME CHANCE...
...EVEN FOR ONE SO LOST IN THE DARKNESS AS MY OLD FRIEND THOTH.
THOUGH, IN TRUTH, THERE ARE MOMENTS WHEN EVEN I DO HAVE MY DOUBTS.
MAY YOU DWELL ALWAYS IN THE GRACE OF IBIS. FAREWELL.
MY TALE IS ENDED, AND THOTH'S BOOK CLOSED. FOR NOW.
FOR NOW...

CONAN THE BARBARIAN:
THE MASK OF ACHERON

"KNOW, O PRINCE, THAT BETWEEN THE YEARS WHEN THE OCEANS DRANK ATLANTIS AND THE GLEAMING CITIES...
"...AND THE YEARS OF THE RISE OF THE SONS OF ARYAS...
"...THERE WAS AN AGE UNDREAMED OF, WHEN SHINING KINGDOMS LAY SPREAD ACROSS THE WORLD LIKE BLUE MANTLES BENEATH THE STARS.
"NEMEDIA, OPHIR, BRYTHUNIA, HYPERBOREA, ZAMORA WITH ITS DARK-HAIRED WOMEN AND TOWERS OF SPIDER-HAUNTED MYSTERY.
"ZINGARA, KOTH, STYGIA WITH ITS SHADOW-GUARDED TOMBS, HYRKANIA WHOSE RIDERS WORE STEEL AND SILK AND GOLD. AQUILONIA, REIGNING SUPREME IN THE DREAMING WEST.
"HITHER...
"...TO TREAD THE JEWELED THRONES OF THE EARTH UNDER HIS BOOTED FEET...

"...CAME KHALAR ZYM.
"AN EXILED PRINCE FROM THE LANDS OF NEMEDIA. A BRIGAND WITH THE TONGUE OF A NOBLEMAN, A WOULD-BE CONQUEROR WITH A FATAL, ALL-CONSUMING OBSESSION.
"BUT MOST OF ALL...
"...A SEEKER AFTER THE DARKEST SORCERY KNOWN TO MAN."

YEARS AGO.
EEEAAAARRRRRGH!
MALIVA, DAUGHTER OF ERIN. YOU HAVE PURSUED THE FORBIDDEN SECRETS OF ANCIENT ACHERON.
YOU SOUGHT TO ENSLAVE ALL HYBORIA WITH YOUR EVIL SORCERY...
AAAHHHHH!
...AND SO, FOR THE SAFETY OF ALL OUR PEOPLE...
...YOU MUST BE PUT TO DEATH.
NO!

SHE--SHE IS WORTH A THOUSAND OF YOU SCUM. YET YOU HUNTED HER DOWN LIKE AN ANIMAL!
AND NOW YOU WOULD MURDER HER--IN AGONY--
--IN FRONT OF OUR DAUGHTER?
I...I CURSE YOU ALL.
YOU CAN BURN MY FLESH, BUT YOU WILL NEVER DESTROY MY SOUL!
H-HUSBAND--RESURRECT ME!
BRING ME BACK--AND I SWEAR--
--I WILL MAKE YOU KING!
NO!

ONE YEAR LATER.
AYE, 'TISN'T MUCH TO LOOK AT.
COULDN'T AFFORD A FANCY IRON ONE, COULD I?
TOUGH TO MAKE AN HONEST LIVING ON THE ZINGARAN SEAS, THESE DAYS.
TOO MANY NORTHERN BARBARIANS FOULIN' THE WATER--
YOU'VE NEVER MADE AN HONEST LIVING IN YOUR LIFE, BRIGAND, AND I'VE NO INTEREST IN YOUR COMPLAINTS.
DO YOU HAVE WHAT I WANT?
AYE.
A GENUINE SHARD OF THE MASK OF ACHERON.
THEY SAY THIS BEAUTY WAS MORE FEARED THAN THE ELDER GODS THEMSELVES. BACK IN ANCIENT TIMES, O' COURSE!
WHY, IF YE SHOULD MANAGE TO GATHER UP ALL THE PIECES... WELL, I'D NOT CARE TO CROSS YOU THEN!
HE SEEKS TO CHEAT US. HE DOES NOT BELIEVE.
NO. BUT HE IS THE FOOL.
THE SHARD IS REAL.
AND, AH, NOW THEN, SIR...
...ABOUT MY PAYMENT?

PAY HIM.
AH, THANK YOU, SIR. CIVILIZED MEN, YOU ARE--A RARITY ON THESE SEAS!
SO REFRESHIN' TO DEAL WITH A MAN OF HONOR AND GOOD TASTE...
...AND SUCH A LOVELY LITTLE NYMPH YOU ARE, TOO!
WILL YE GIVE US A SMILE?

*
WHUMP
AH, MARNGUE, SO MUCH LIKE YOUR MOTHER.
I KILLED NINE MEN IN ALL, FOR TOUCHING HER.
FATHER...
...TELL ME ABOUT ACHERON.

THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, CHILD...THE KINGDOM OF ACHERON WAS THE MOST FEARED IN ALL THE WORLD.
ITS REIGN OF TERROR REACHED FROM NEMEDIA THROUGH AQUILONIA, DOWN TO ARGOS IN THE SOUTH. AND THE SOURCE OF ACHERON'S POWER...
"...WAS ITS NECROMANCERS.
"DARK HEARTED THEY WERE, DEVOTED ONLY TO THEIR ARTS... AND TO CONQUEST. IN THEIR SINGLE-MINDED FERVOR, THEY HARNESSED POWERS NOW LOST TO US, IN THIS FALLEN AGE.
"LEGEND SAYS THEY SACRIFICED VIRGINS... THEIR OWN, AND THOSE OF NEIGHBORING AND CONQUERED LANDS...TO FEED THEIR HUNGRY GODS, AS WELL AS THEIR OWN LUST FOR BLOOD AND POWER.

"AND THEIR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT...THE TALISMAN WIELDED BY THEIR SORCERER-KING AS HE STRODE ACROSS THIS WORLD LIKE A GOD...WAS THE *MASK OF ACHERON.*
"WHEN THE BARBARIANS--THE YOUNG KINGDOMS--ROSE UP AGAINST ACHERON, THE MASK ITSELF WAS SHATTERED INTO A DOZEN PIECES. BUT SUCH WAS ITS POWER, THAT IT COULD NOT BE DESTROYED.
"THE OLD SCROLLS SAY ITS MAGICS CAN ONLY BE UNLEASHED BY *THE BLOOD OF A PURE ACHERONIAN.* VERY FEW OF THOSE YET EXIST; ACHERON'S PEOPLE LONG AGO FLED TO THE HILLS, INTERBREEDING WITH THE TRIBES OF AQUILONIA AND NEMEDIA.
"BUT AFTER WE HAVE GATHERED UP EVERY SHARD OF THE MASK...THEN, MARIQUE, I SWEAR TO YOU..."
...WE SHALL USE ITS ANCIENT POWER...
...TO RETURN YOUR MOTHER TO LIFE.

CIMMERIA. YEARS LATER.
THERE IS NO SHAME IN KNEELING BEFORE ME...
...ALL THESE FIGHTERS HAVE SURRENDERED, LEFT THEIR LANDS, SWORN THEIR ALLEGIANCE TO ME.
BECAUSE THEY KNOW I WILL ONE DAY BE A GOD.
ONE DAY, THE OTHER CLANS OF CIMMERIA WILL GATHER TO AVENGE US. THEN--GOD OR NOT--YOU SHALL FALL--
I NEED BUT ONE MORE PIECE TO COMPLETE THIS MASK. AND THAT PIECE IS HERE.
GIVE IT TO ME NOW...OR DIE, AND I'LL FIND IT MYSELF.
I PREFER DEATH.
VERY WELL.

!
--MBY DNOSE!
AAAAHHHH!
SKASSSH
UHHH!

IS THAT YOUR SON, CIMMERIAN?
I LIKE HIM.
MY NAME IS CONAN!
...THE BONE SHARD-- IT'S NOT HERE.
YOU JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO LOOK.
THIS TASK REQUIRES UNIQUE TALENTS...

...MARIQUE?
THE CIMMERIANS DO NOT PRAY. THEY HAVE NO PRIESTS, NO TEACHERS.
THIS IS WHAT MATTERS TO THEM. THIS IS THEIR CHURCH...
...IT WILL BE HERE.
WELL DONE.
YOUR MOTHER WOULD BE PROUD.
GATHER THE MEN.
BURN IT ALL.

WAIT-- NOT THE BOY. NOT YET.
NOT YED?
HE CUT OFF MBY DNOSE!
HOW DO I PUNISH YOU, CIMMERIAN?
YOU FEAR NOT DEATH, NOR PAIN, NOR INSULT TO HONOR.
SOMETHING WORSE THAN DEATH, THEN.
NGGHH!
SSSSS
GHLSSSHHH

CONAN--
GON.
YOU CANNOT SAVE ME--
--LET GO OF THE CHAIN.
EEEAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!
THE LAST PIECE.
WE ARE HALFWAY THERE, MARIQUE.
NOW--WE RIDE.
TO FIND THE PUREBLOOD!

SHEM. TODAY.
YEARS. YEARS OF SEARCHING...
TO WHAT CURSED LAND HAVE YOU BROUGHT US NOW?

THE PUREBLOOD IS CLOSE.
I CAN TASTE HER SCENT ON THE AIR.

THE MONASTERY OF SHEM.
IT LIES BEYOND THIS CAVE, MARIQUE?
YES, FATHER...

...AND SO DOES THE ONE WE SEEK.

MASTER? IS SOMETHING WRONG--
BOOM
COME, TAMARA. QUICKLY!

WHICH ONE OF YOU IS THE PUREBLOOD?
WHOEVER POINTS HER OUT WILL BE SPARED.

IS IT YOU?
AAHHHHHH!

PTT!
NOT PURE!

*

UHHHH!
YOU, PERHAPS?

GET INTO THE CARRIAGE--
NO! I WILL DEFEND OUR HOME!
YOU ARE MY FINEST STUDENT, TAMARA, AND I TELL YOU, NOW:
FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR PEOPLE, YOU MUST LEAVE THIS PLACE AND GO TO THE MONK'S IN NYRKANIA.
IT IS YOUR DUTY.
DO NOT HESITATE AND DO NOT WAVER!
EH?
AFTER THEM!
LET NONE ESCAPE!

YOU KNOW WHO I'VE COME FOR, OLD MAN.
WHY SUFFER OVER IT?
N-NONE OF THE ANCIENT BLOODLINE REMAIN.
YOUR SEARCH IS IN VAIN.
HE WILL TELL ME HIS SECRETS, FATHER, AS HAVE ALL OTHERS BEFORE HIM...
I...I KNOW WHO YOU ARE. KHALAR ZYM.
YOUR VAIN PURSUIT OF THE SECRETS OF ACHERON IS A LUST FOR POWER, NOT A LOVE OF LIFE.
YOUR WIFE DESERVED TO BURN.
M-MY LORD? A WOMAN HAS ESCAPED TO THE SOUTH.
REMO AND HIS MEN ARE IN PURSUIT...
UNGH!

SO, FATHER...

...THE PRIZE IS NEAR.
AT LAST YOU WILL HAVE NOT ONLY THE MASK, BUT ALSO THE BLOOD TO FILL IT.
HOW YOUR MOTHER YEARNED FOR THE SORCERY OF ACHERON.
IMAGINE WHAT SECRETS SHE WILL BRING BACK FROM THE REALM OF THE DEAD. IMAGINE HOW *INDOMITABLE* I WILL BECOME, WITH HER ONCE MORE AT MY SIDE.

BUT, FATHER... IF THE GIRL IS LOST, OR THE RITUAL FAILS--
IT WILL NOT FAIL!
MALIVA *WILL* RETURN.

MY POWERS ARE GROWING, FATHER. AND MOTHER'S BLOOD FLOWS THROUGH ME.
I COULD UNCOVER THE SECRETS OF ACHERON, AS SHE DID. I COULD MAKE THEM ALL *KNEEL BEFORE YOU*... JUST AS I DO NOW.

YES, MARIQUE. YOU ARE LIKE YOUR MOTHER, IN VERY MANY WAYS.
BUT YOU ARE *NOT* HER.

WHAT--?!
SKSSSHH
...REMO...
"THE SHAIPUR OUTPOST AT MIDDAY--COME ALONE."
IT'S HER...

'...THE PUREBLOOD.'
SHAIPUR OUTPOST. THE NEXT DAY.
YOU ARE BOLD, NORTHERNER.
I ADMIRE COURAGE, EVEN IN THE FOOLISH.
YOUR REWARD.
I DON'T WANT YOUR GOLD.
WHAT DO YOU WANT?

YOUR HEAD.
YES, YES. OF COURSE...
...KILL HIM.

UHHHH!
SKTTCHH
AT LAST...

WHAT--
HA!
CONAN!
RUN, WOMAN! FLEE!
SO, NOT CAPTOR AND CAPTIVE, AFTER ALL--
SKANNG
--BUT ALLIES.
WHO ARE YOU?
I AM THE BOY YOU LEFT BEHIND, HOLDING A CHAIN...

...TO WATCH HIS FATHER DIE.
SKANNG
THE CIMMERIAN...
CLUMSY.
WOULDN'T YOUR FATHER BE ASHAMED?
UNNH!

POISON.
TREACHERY...
I'M DISAPPOINTED, CIMMERIAN. THINGS WERE JUST STARTING TO GET INTERESTING.
UP, CONAN!
THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY OUT OF THIS FORTRESS, NORTHERNER.
YOU'RE TRAPPED!

UP THE WALL, GIRL.
GIVE HER TO ME AND I'LL LET YOU LIVE!
KRABOOOOOMMMMM
THIS IS YOUR PLAN?
THERE'S NOWHERE TO GO...
...BUT DOWN.
NO!

YOU! YOUR SORCERY HAS FAILED ME. YOUR WEAKNESS SICKENS ME.
MY WEAKNESS?
IT WAS I WHO FOUND HER. I WHO SAVED YOU FROM THE BARBARIAN'S KILLING THRUST!

WATCH MY SORCERY SHATTER THE MASK, FATHER. WATCH ME SCATTER THE PIECES IN THE SEA.
WATCH ME TEAR THE EYES FROM YOUR SOLDIERS AND SET THE WALLS AFLAME.

THEN WILL YOU DARE CALL ME WEAK?

FORGIVE ME, CHILD. WE ARE SO CLOSE TO EVERYTHING--TO ALL THAT WE HAVE SPENT OUR LIVES PURSUING.
YOU ARE EVERY-THING TO ME. AND I WANT YOU TO USE ALL YOUR UNIQUE AND VALUABLE GIFTS...

...TO FIND HER AGAIN.

THE NEXT DAY.
THANK YOU.
AND GOODBYE.

UHHH!
SHUNS SHEFS SHUNS
THUD
NO...

...HELLO, MY ELUSIVE ONE.
YOU-- YOU'VE MADE A MISTAKE.
I AM NOT THE ONE YOU ARE LOOKING FOR--

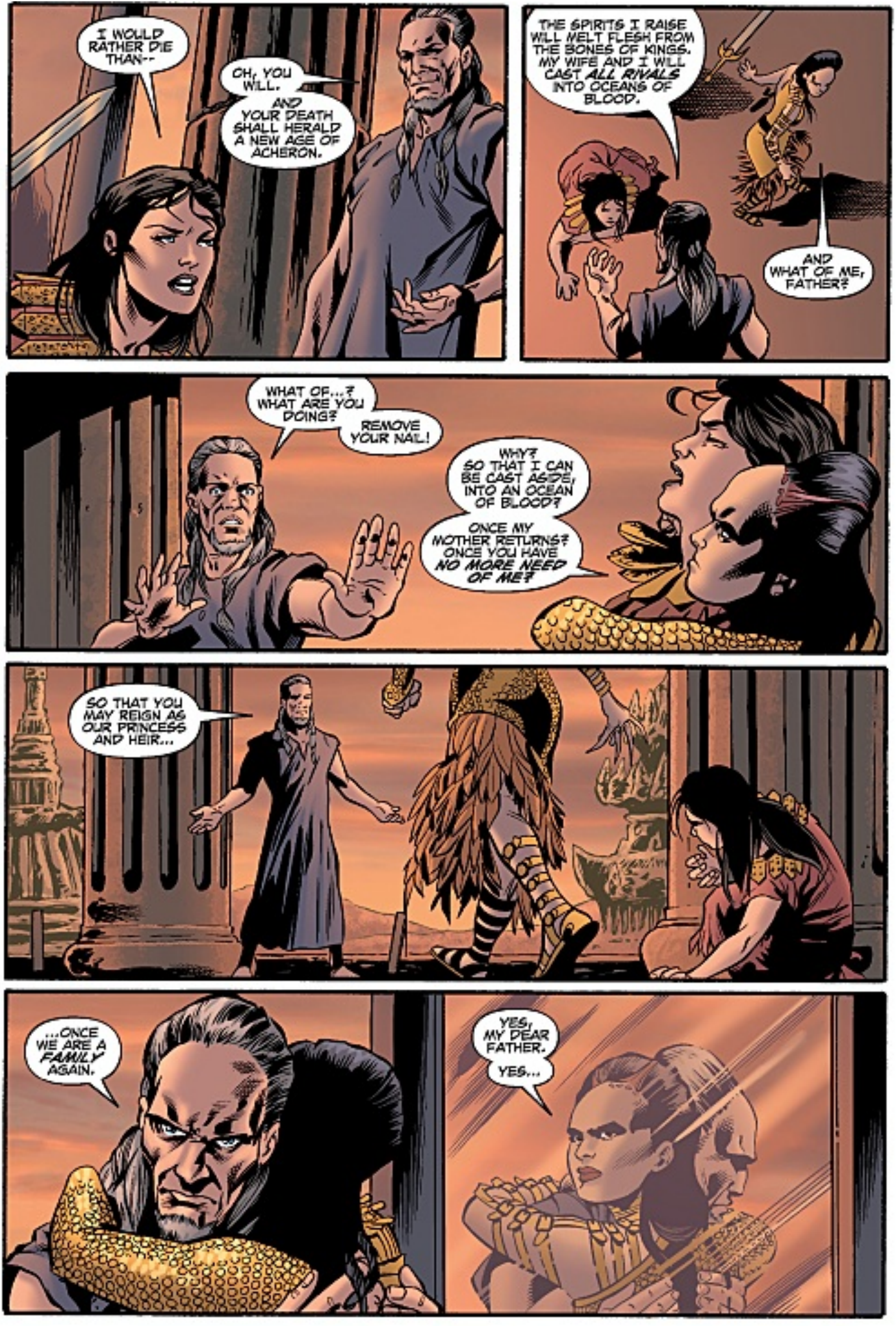
--AHHH!

SHE IS THE PUREBLOOD DESCENDANT OF THE NECROMANCERS OF ACHERON.
GOOD.
WE BEGIN THE RITUAL AT ONCE.

NO...TOMORROW NIGHT. WHEN THE MOON IS DARK AND EAGER TO BE REBORN, AND THE TIDE EBBS, LEAVING THE RUINS OF KHOR KALBA DRY.
MY DAUGHTER. MY BEAUTIFUL, BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER.

YOU HAVE MADE ME PROUD.

MY MOTHER WORE THIS GOWN ON HER WEDDING DAY...
I--I AM NOT YOUR MOTHER.
NO. BUT YOU WILL BE.
IMAGINE YOUR BODY IS A VESSEL, AND YOUR SOUL IS THE WATER THAT FILLS IT. WHEN YOUR BLOOD SEEDS THE MASK, MY FATHER WILL EMPTY YOU.
AND MY MOTHER'S SOUL WILL RISE TO FILL YOU UP. YOUR TOES, YOUR LEGS, UP INTO YOUR BREASTS, NECK, AND LIPS...
...UNTIL MY MOTHER TURNS YOUR PRETTY BLUE EYES PITCH BLACK.
DID YOU KNOW I MET YOUR BARBARIAN WHEN HE WAS A BOY?
I TOOK THIS SWORD FROM HIM.
I'M TOLD THAT CIMMERIAN STEEL IS SHARPER AND HARDER THAN ANY OTHER.
THAT WHEN IT CUTS, THE PAIN IS ALMOST THE SAME AS PLEASURE.


I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN--
OH, YOU WILL.
AND YOUR DEATH SHALL HERALD A NEW AGE OF ACHERON.
THE SPIRITS I RAISE WILL MELT FLESH FROM THE BONES OF KINGS. MY WIFE AND I WILL CAST ALL RIVALS INTO OCEANS OF BLOOD.
AND WHAT OF ME, FATHER?
WHAT OF...? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
REMOVE YOUR NAIL!
WHY? SO THAT I CAN BE CAST ASIDE, INTO AN OCEAN OF BLOOD?
ONCE MY MOTHER RETURNS? ONCE YOU HAVE NO MORE NEED OF ME?
SO THAT YOU MAY REIGN AS OUR PRINCESS AND HEIR...
...ONCE WE ARE A FAMILY AGAIN.
YES, MY DEAR FATHER.
YES...

SKULL CAVE. THAT NIGHT.
...IT BEGINS.
AS A VICTORIOUS BARBARIAN SWORD ONCE SHATTERED THE MASK, EONS AGO...NOW A VANQUISHED BARBARIAN SWORD SHALL RESTORE IT.
BY LUSTY DERKETO AND SERPENT-HEADED SET...
AAARRRRRRR!
...BY DAGON AND NERGAL...
...I FEED THE MASK WITH ITS MASTER'S BLOOD.

ANCIENT ONES, WHO BURN BENEATH US...
...UNSPEAKABLE ARE THY NAMES...
...BEHOLD AND DESPAIR...
...YOUR NEW MASTER!
MALIVA...MY QUEEN...
...HEAR MY CALL...

CONAN!
SKWINZZ
KLANNG
RRRRMMMMMMMRRRRRRRRR

GO!
FIND A WAY OUT!
TWK
NORTHLANDER BASTARD!
THAT WAS YOUR LAST CHANCE, KHALAR. YOU WON'T GET ANOTHER.
WON'T YOUR DEAD QUEEN BE ASHAMED?
ARRHH!

CONAN!
YOUR FATHER--YOU'RE NOTHING TO HIM. YOU KNOW THAT, DEEP INSIDE.
HE ONLY CARES FOR HER.
HOW WILL IT FEEL WHEN HE CASTS YOU ASIDE?
AIIIEEEEEEEEEE!

WITCH--

--DIE LIKE YOUR MOTHER.
FFFFFFF--...K

MARIQUE!

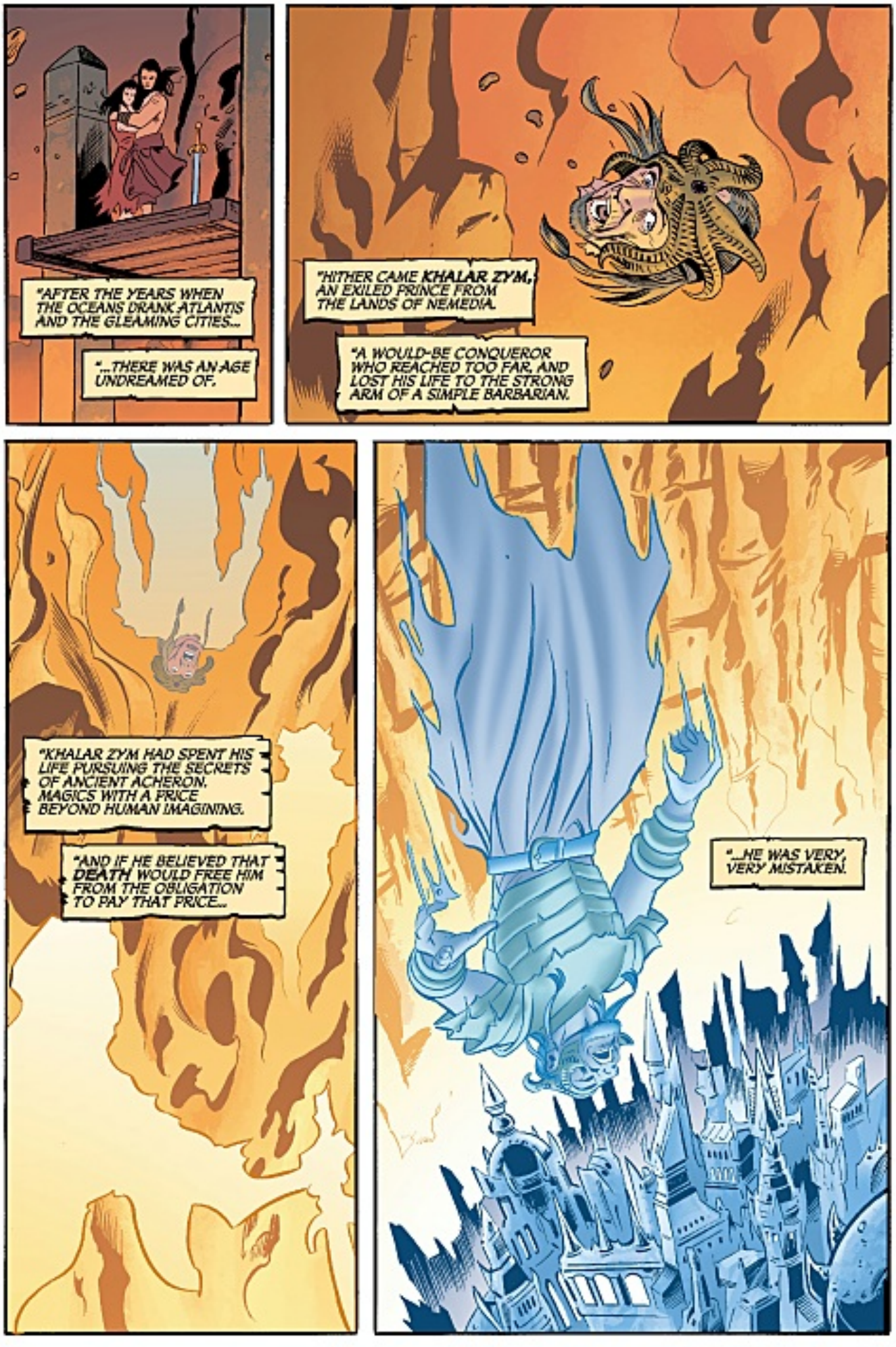
SKANGGGG
I WILL KILL YOU WITH YOUR FATHER'S SWORD!

I THINK NOT, DOG!

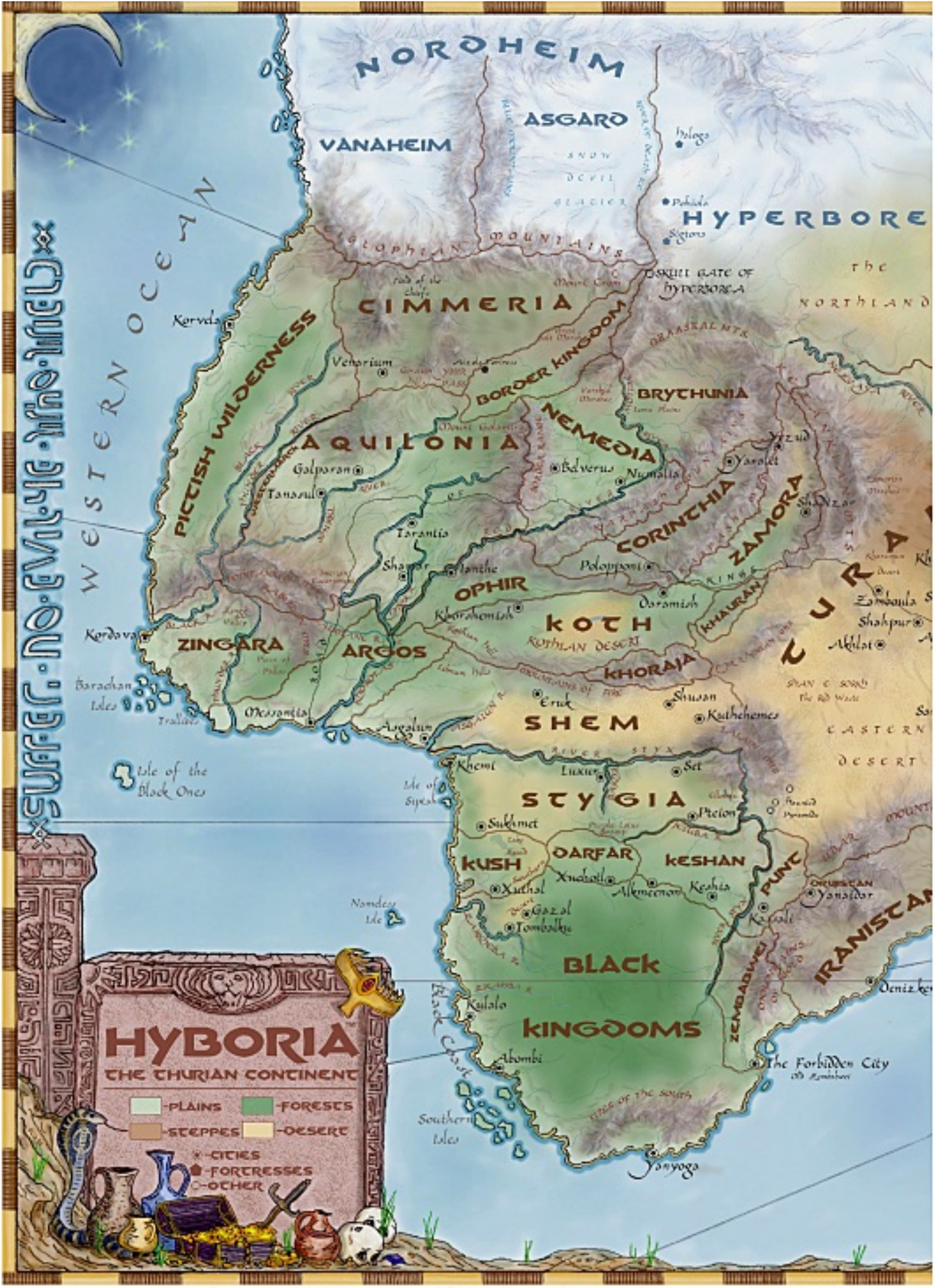
AAAAH!
TAMARA!
UHHHH!
BESIDE ME, NONE ARE EQUAL. BENEATH ME, ALL MUST SUBMIT.
BEFORE ME, ALL RIVALS WILL BE SACRIFICED!
MALIVA-- MY ETERNAL LOVE--
--I SUMMON YOU HERE!
HIS-- HIS WITCH POSSESSES ME.
LET GO OF ME. DROP ME, CONAN!

ONCE AGAIN, THE LITTLE CIMMERIAN BOY IS CAUGHT HOLDING A CHAIN.
I WARNED YOU...
...THAT ONE DAY I WOULD BECOME A GOD.
AND MY FATHER WARNED *YOU*, SORCERER.

GOD OR NOT--
--YOU WILL FALL!
AAAAAHH.


"AFTER THE YEARS WHEN THE OCEANS DRANK ATLANTIS AND THE GLEAMING CITIES...
"...THERE WAS AN AGE UNDREAMED OF.
"HITHER CAME KHALAR ZYM, AN EXILED PRINCE FROM THE LANDS OF NEMEDIA.
"A WOULD-BE CONQUEROR WHO REACHED TOO FAR, AND LOST HIS LIFE TO THE STRONG ARM OF A SIMPLE BARBARIAN.
"KHALAR ZYM HAD SPENT HIS LIFE PURSUING THE SECRETS OF ANCIENT ACHERON. MAGICS WITH A PRICE BEYOND HUMAN IMAGINING.
"AND IF HE BELIEVED THAT DEATH WOULD FREE HIM FROM THE OBLIGATION TO PAY THAT PRICE...
"...HE WAS VERY, VERY MISTAKEN.

"THE NECROMANCERS OF ACHERON HAD HARNESSED THE MOST POWERFUL SORCERIES THE WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN.
"IT WAS RUMORED THEY COULD EVEN TRANSCEND DEATH.
"TO THEM, KHALAR ZYM WAS A BASE PRETENDER TO THEIR GLORY.
"AND WHETHER HIS PRESENCE RAISED THEIR IRE, THEIR CONTEMPT, OR MERELY A COLD INDIFFERENCE...ONE THING IS SURE:
"THEY SAW IN HIM A FRESH SUBJECT FOR THEIR RITUALS. THE SAME RITES THAT HAD CREATED THE MASK OF ACHERON, MILLENNIA AGO.
"SADISTIC, HORRID EXPERIMENTS. BLOOD RITES, AGONIES WITHOUT LIMIT.
"AND AS THEY STRAPPED HIM DOWN TO THE TABLE, KHALAR ZYM KNEW:
"IT WOULD LAST FOREVER.
"GOOD NIGHT, O PRINCE.
"SLEEP WELL."
THE END



Conan the Barbarian: The Mask of Acheron map by Clayton Bunce

LOULAN PLATEAU
PATHENIA
Sythia
HYRKANIA
KARA KORUM
Desert of Black Sands
Wan Tengri
Shu Chen
LEMURIA
Rhamdam
VILAYET SEA
ZARFHAANA STEPPES
Shaulun
Paikang
Onagrul
KUSAN
GREAT WALL OF KHITAI
Ruo Gen
KHITAI
Khoraf
WUHUAN DESERT
Secunderam
Khawarism
Shangara
MERU
KAMBUJA
GHULISTAN
HIMELIAN MOUNTAINS
AFGHANISTAN
VENIPUR
UTTARA KURU
Ayodhya
Gwandiakan
Angkhor
KOSALA
Forest of Ghendas
Anshan
Peshkhauri
Khorala
Yota Pong
VENDHYA
Isles of Pearl
Misty Isles
EQUATOR
EASTERN OCEAN
SOUTHERN SEA
MU
0 300 600 1200
SCALE IN MILES

Acheron: The Nightmare inside the Age Undreamed Of

By Dale E. Rippke

Over the space of four years, back in the early 1930s, Texan author Robert E. Howard crafted one of the most indelible characters to ever capture the attention of the pulp-magazine-reading public. This character was at various times a warrior, a thief, a pirate, a frontier scout, a treasure hunter, and an all-around adventurer. His name was Conan, and he hailed from a misty place called Cimmeria during a forgotten prehistoric era that Howard dubbed the Hyborian Age. During that fertile four years, Howard fashioned twenty-one tales of the redoubtable Cimmerian, ranging from short stories to an episodic novel. He sold seventeen of these stories to *Weird Tales* magazine and saw most of them published prior to his untimely suicide in 1936.

Although Howard crafted "The Hyborian Age," a historical essay of Conan's imaginary world, prior to starting his new series, you could not make the case that the whole thing sprang fully formed into his mind. Instead the pseudohistory evolved in a rather piecemeal manner as Howard colorfully filled in the forgotten past of his stories with whatever his imagination required to make them shine.

In 1934 Howard tried his hand at writing a novel featuring his Conan character for a British publishing house. It was called *The Hour of the Dragon* and was in some ways a mash-up of several earlier Conan stories. This novel featured a three-thousand-year-old resurrected sorcerer named Xaltotun as Conan's supernatural antagonist. Xaltotun was the most

The concept art herein is courtesy of Funcom and gives us a beautiful visual representation of the Acheronian aesthetic. Pictured: a ring with inlaid characters.

powerful mage in his time, and before his death he lived in an amazing, shadow-haunted land called Acheron.

Acheron as a named historical entity only appears in *The Hour of the Dragon*. But in his previously written stories and in "The Hyborian Age," Howard alludes to the existence of a long-lost civilization thousands of years prior to Conan's life. If one takes the position that this forgotten civilization is actually the remnants of Acheron and that the timeline that Howard laid out in his essay changed substantially as he wrote the stories ("The Tower of the Elephant" uses the original timeline, while the very next story written, "The Scarlet Citadel," uses a revised timeline), then it is fairly simple to map out the history of Acheron.

The history of Acheron is tied to the history of Archaic Stygia. Archaic Stygia was the remnants of a forgotten Elder Earth civilization whose foundation predated the appearance of human beings. This prehuman civilization worshiped a demon lord called the Great Serpent. Millennia passed and mankind flourished as the Elder Earth races began to wither and vanish. Sometime during the Thurian Age (the time of King Kull of Valusia) this demon lord (who was now called Set) saw the writing on the wall, decided to take human form, and mated with the daughters of mankind, creating a hybrid race called the Children of Set that ruled over Thurian-era Stygia in a city named Luxor. The Children of Set were essentially human, but the demonic taint of Set made them appear as giant snakes with human faces. Some time after this, the Great Cataclysm put an end to the Thurian Age.

Archaic Stygia managed to survive the worldwide disaster. They found that the disaster had left their shattered capital of Luxor in the midst of a hostile desert, so they packed up and moved to a large fertile river valley to their west. The northward-flowing river was called the Nilus and it emptied into a small, salty inland sea. Archaic Stygia expanded along the sea's coast, building their cyclopean cities along freshwater rivers that emptied into this salty mere. The citadels of Kuthchemes and Pteion were built during this period.

Even before the cataclysm the rulers of the land had evolved into a much more human-looking appearance; Howard called them the giant-kings. They still contained the demonic taint of Set, and this taint allowed them to manipulate the forces of magic much more easily than a normal human could. An era of sorcery and necromancy took hold of the race, and Archaic Stygia became a nation of blood and magic. One of their most notable magical creations was a fantastic flaming jewel called the Heart of Ahriman. This artifact was given the ability to kill at a word, bring the dead back to life, and most importantly, dispel *any* sorcerous spell cast. Magic ruled the lives of everyone in Archaic Stygia.

Five hundred years later, a lesser cataclysm rearranged the face of their world, uplifting the lands to the east of the salty sea and causing it to drain westward to the ocean through an old river valley that was originally formed back in the Thurian Age by a western section of the Stagus River. The channel cut by this drainage in turn became the western leg of the Nilus River, and during this period it was referred to as either the Nilus or Stagus before it became more commonly known as the River Styx.

Once more the Archaic Stygians picked up the pieces and rebuilt their civilization. They expanded westward along the new river channel, building a new capital city named Luxor after their old Thurian Age capital. The nation eventually stretched all the way to the Western Ocean. The city of Khemi was founded at the

mouth of the Styx, and another round of massive stonework and pyramids was completed by the magic of the giants.

Khemi became the mercantile center of the archaic civilization. It sent ships north and south along the coast, only to find that while there was commerce to be had with the black lands of the south there was no one living in the north. The sailors of Khemi proceeded to establish an outpost at the mouth of a large northern river that they most likely called the River Acheron, but would in later days be called the Khorotas River.

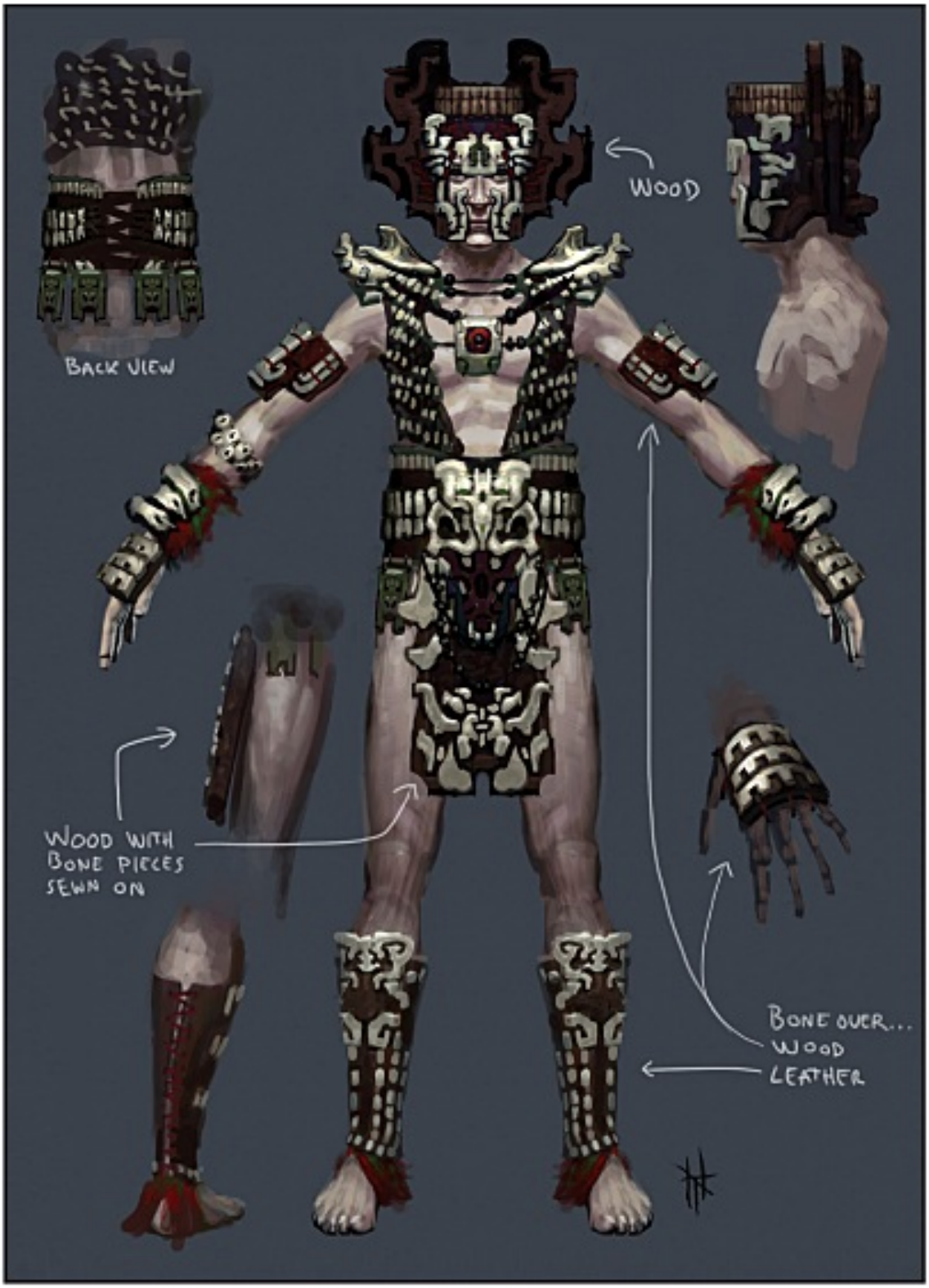
For the next several hundred years the tall, Set-worshiping humans of the northern outpost explored and exploited the lands along the great river and discovered the moldering ruins of ancient Valusian cities, plundering them for their magic relics. Eventually they ventured into the great tributary river that in Hyborian times would come to be called the Tybor (it could be argued that the river considered the Tybor branch was actually the main part of the River Acheron). In short order they probably discovered gold in the streams leading out of the mountain range that extended along the southern side of the Tybor valley. An investigation soon uncovered a great deal of wealth from the gold and gemstones discovered within the mountains. A number of villages sprang up along this part of the river to take advantage of the mineral discoveries and attracted a great number of citizens seeking their fortune. Before long the rapidly growing towns were banding together, and formed the backbone of Archaic Stygia's first real colony. This colony became known as Acheron.

A thousand years after the Lesser Cataclysm, the giant-kings back along the Styx were living a life of idle, decadent splendor built on the subjugation of the area's nomadic tribes and blacks from the lands to its south. A cloud of dust on the eastern horizon was the first indication that their world was about to be turned upside down by a nomadic eastern race that Howard never names.

A decorative wooden shield used by the Acheronian warrior.

The first city of any importance to face the invading nomads was the citadel of Kuthchemes. The walled city, which up until this time had never contended with anything larger than infrequent nomadic raids, found itself facing a large, disciplined army of invaders intent on its capitulation. The vastly underdefended city fell in short order. I believe that during this battle the nomads managed to capture the Heart of Ahriman from the dying giant-kings in the city. The capture of Kuthchemes gave them a base to accomplish the subjugation of the rest of the Styx valley cities.

The armed forces of the giant-kings were hampered by mutiny from within—the subjected humans that comprised it. Deprived of the Heart, its sorcerers were forced for the first time in millennia to depend on their own little-used magical abilities. The sorcerers were hindered by unseen forces conjured by the nomad's wizard-priests, who in turn were able to use the Heart to dispel the magic of the



Acheronian armor allows for a maximum amount of mobility and moderate protection.

giants. Refugees fleeing from the cities of the east tied up the resources of the remaining cities in knots. Treachery unwove the fabric of society as various noble houses made secret deals with the nomads to betray the rest of their number for a place in the succeeding order.

The archaic empire of the giant-kings rapidly dissolved in blood and flames. Refugee groups taking as much as they could carry fled the nation by ship for the sanctuary of Acheron's cities. One of the giant-kings by the name of Asura escaped to reside in Vendhya. The rest of the prehuman giants were killed

as the nomadic invaders consolidated their gains. Howard was correct; the second-oldest race in the world was now effectively extinct.

The conquerors co-opted the giant-kings' culture and ritual, and they almost immediately began to refer to themselves as Stygians. As promised, the treacherous noble houses of the giant-human hybrids that aided the newly minted Stygians were incorporated into the upper tier of Stygian society. In time the Stygians came to realize that by intermarrying with the demon-tainted nobles they could gain genetic access to the hybrids' innate magical abilities.

The destruction of their homeland caused the Acheron colony to become isolated and fairly insular. This did not last long. Somewhere far to the north, a new race of tall, tawny-haired barbarians called the Hyborians had burst upon the scene. While most of the Hyborians were content at that time to remain in their homelands, a fairly sizable group split off from the main body and migrated far to the south. Eventually this early barbarian drift came across the colony of Set worshipers. The Hyborians agreed to spare the colony in exchange for their knowledge of agriculture, metallurgy, and magic. The demon-tainted descendants of the giant-kings were absorbed intact and disappeared into the genetic mix of the Hyborians, ceasing to exist as a separate race.

In much the same way that the nomads far to the south appropriated the culture of Archaic Stygia, the Hyborians swiftly adopted the technology, religion, and culture of the absorbed colony. The first Hyborian nation of Acheron had begun.

In a break with their past, the men of Acheron built incredible cities of tall purple towers, instead of the cyclopean architecture that defined the giant-kings. Their capital and greatest city was built on the plains to the north of the River Acheron (Tybor) in what would become south-central Nemedia. They called it Python, and it was the apex of sorcerous knowledge. Although there were other cities in the empire, Howard never bothered to name them.

Acheron's population began spreading out until it encompassed much of the lands that would later be called Aquilonia, Nemedia, and Argos. It subjugated every race it came across (with the exception of the proto-Cimmerians) as slaves or sacrifices for their blood magic. This was the earliest phase of what came to be thought of as the Nightmare Empire.

Far to the south during this time, the wizards of Stygia had been busy learning all they could from the surviving hybrid nobles about the magical abilities of the Heart of Ahriman. The Stygians also began to have bilateral commercial dealings with the land of Acheron, probably due to its worshiping of Set.

Acheron's slow expansion continued southward and eastward into relatively unpopulated lands. The Stygians had also been expanding into the uplands north of Shem and came to share an uneasy border with Acheron. To the east, the nation of Zamora had arisen from the labors of the Zhemri. All of this was going to change dramatically in a few hundred years.

Two hundred years or so after the founding of its capital city of Python, the ever-expanding empire encountered the first of an increasing flood of tall, tawny-haired Hyborians from the northern lands. The barbarian flood split itself on the nation of Acheron like a rock in a stream, some diverting southwestward and others southeastward.

The Hyborians quickly filled the lands to the west of Acheron, traveling as far south as the Western Ocean. Trapped as they were between the Picts to the west and the Acheronians to the east, the

Hyborians had no real choice but to settle in the western areas of Acheron, where they became the choice targets of slave raiders from the east.

A branded war horse.

The slow Hyborian drift along the eastern borders of Acheron continued south until the Stygians stopped them along a line of forts in Corinthia. Eventually, the pressure from succeeding drifts pushed the Hyborians into the Stygian uplands.

Howard's writings seem to imply that the Stygians resisted the Hyborian invasion into the uplands and slaughtered them by the thousands. Eventually the Acheronians allowed refugees of the three large Hyborian tribes to settle in the less-populated southern regions of their nation as a buffer with the Stygians. There are indications that the nascent nations of Koth, Ophir, and Corinthia were formed at this time, although Acheron probably considered them nothing more than subject provinces.

It is also of interest to note that it is around this time that the Heart of Ahriman disappeared from Stygia and made its way to Acheron. Whether this occurred through theft or by a war between Stygia and Acheron is unclear. We do know that an Acheronian mage named Xaltotun came into possession of the Heart and used it to become the premier sorcerer in that turbulent land of wizards.

Did the wizard-priests of Acheron ever consider the Hyborian drifts to be a particularly immediate threat? I don't believe so. I don't think they ever really saw the other Hyborians as anything other than raw material to fuel their magic rituals and grease the infrastructure of their society. Plus, for all intents and purposes, the people of Acheron were Hyborians, and these people were their kinsmen. The Hyborian drifts were seen as nothing more than a nuisance. The Hyborian situation in the east seemed to be pretty stable with the establishment of Koth, Ophir, and Corinthia. The Hyborian situation in the thinly settled western areas of Acheron was kept in check by slave raids and the destruction of entire villages.

But to the Hyborian tribes subjugated by the Acheronians, this matter was seen in a completely different light. Set worship was demonic in practice, and the average person quailed at the thought of ending up as grist in a blood-soaked ritual. And Acheron seemed to have a stranglehold on religion that didn't tolerate the worship of the Hyborian gods Bori and Mitra.

Which leads me to the most contentious part of this article. "The Hyborian Age" tells of a fifteen-hundred-year period between the founding of the Hyborian kingdoms and Conan's life. "The Phoenix on the Sword" also speaks of an event fifteen hundred years previous, when the Hyborians were freed from their subjugation to the tyranny of Set. It seems obvious that the two events are linked. But from the fourth Conan tale onward to the end of the series, the date of the founding of the Hyborian nations is set at three thousand years prior to Conan's life. And *The Hour*

of the Dragon tells us of Set-worshiping Acheron and its destruction at the hands of the Hyborians. Both dates can't be true, so to my rationale, Howard must have changed his mind about the timeline, and the fifteen-hundred-year events and the three-thousand-year events are the same exact moments in history. And that moment is the end of Acheron.

Three thousand years before Conan, in the regions to the west of Acheron, a man named Epemitreus was born, and when he grew to manhood he became a priest of the Hyborian god Mitra (Xaltotun derisively describes him as a feathered shaman). This priest of Mitra discovered the key to the salvation of his people lay in a magical bauble called the Heart of Ahriman. So he contrived to steal it from where Xaltotun kept it hidden. Epemitreus learned that he could negate the magic of Acheron's wizards with the aid of the Heart. He persuaded the western Hyborian tribes to unite into two (possibly more) great armies under the command of war chiefs from the Aquilon and Nemed clans. Shortly thereafter these armies began to attack selected targets along Acheron's western frontier, with Epemitreus using the Heart to negate all magic used against them. The west quickly dissolved into blood and chaos.

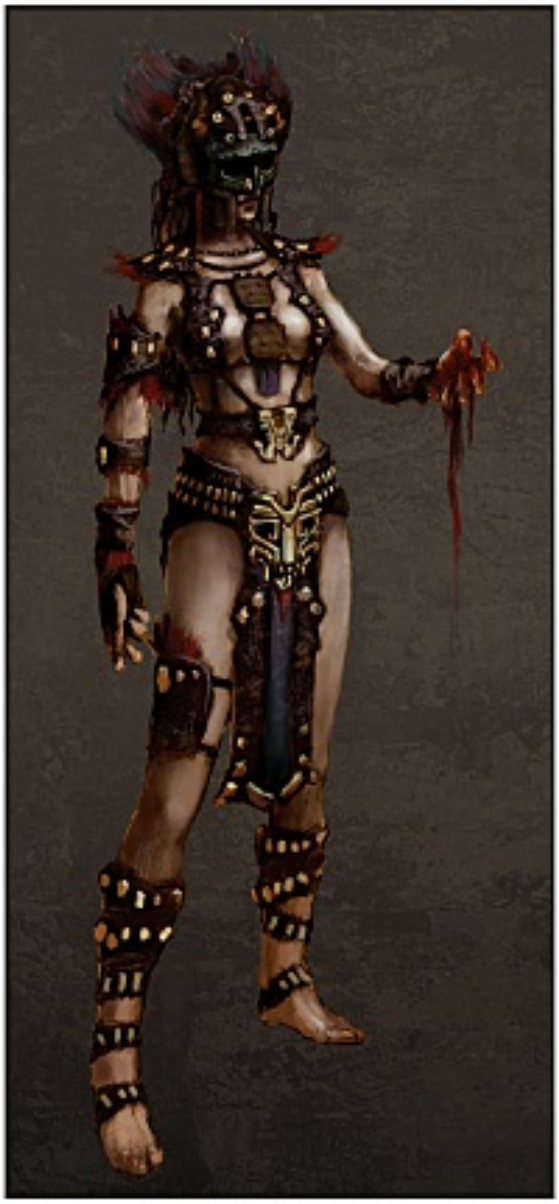
The Aquilon army bored into Acheron from the west, while the army of the Nemed clan attacked primarily from the north. Powerful mages sent to destroy the Hyborian armies were rendered ineffectual and destroyed by the power of the Heart. Acheron's reliance on magic was proving to be its undoing.

In an effort to stabilize the war in the west, Acheron demanded that the subject kingdoms of Koth, Ophir, and Corinthia send troops to help repel the invasion. The three kingdoms acquiesced and sent armies into Acheron to aid in its defense. Once there, the army led by Khossus V of Koth treacherously rebelled and attacked the Acheronian units in the east. The armies of Ophir and Corinthia followed suit, and the eastern regions of Acheron were decimated.

Its magic largely ineffective and its subject armies in revolt, the empire of Acheron fell in flaming

Concept art illustrating the various looks of Acheronian crowns.

ruin. The army of the Aquilon destroyed the Khorotas and western Tybor River cities, finally joining with the army of Koth to destroy the major Acheronian port city on the Khorotas River estuary (their original Stygian outpost). The army of the Nemed burned and pillaged across the areas of Acheron east of the central mountains, surrounding and utterly destroying the capital of Python. They then swept southward until they ran into the army of Ophir near the Tybor River pass. The combined Hyborian armies obliterated all of Acheron's beautiful purple-towered cities, razing them to the bedrock.



Acheron's bloody past finally caught up to it. The mighty kingdom was decimated by outside forces as well as rebellion within its own ranks.

Hundreds of years of racial hatred exploded across the length and width of Acheron. Extreme hatred of Set worship caused the Hyborians to put to the sword every single serpent worshiper they encountered. With the aid of better weapons, armor, and tactics, the men of Koth, Ophir, and Corinthia pushed southward and swiftly drove the Stygians from the fertile uplands to enlarge their kingdoms. A Stygian army sent to take back the region was defeated and chased back to Kuthchemes, which the Hyborians promptly sacked. The few surviving Set-worshiping Acheronians fled to the hills, to Zamora, or back to their original homeland in Stygia.

After the civil war concluded, the Heart of Ahriman was placed in a cave near the site of the bloodiest battle of the war, and protected by demonic means. The cave was hidden by a temple dedicated to the Hyborian god Mitra built over the site. In time, the victorious Hyborians built Aquilonia's capital city of Tarantia around the temple.

The great wizard Xaltotun survived the civil war and fled to Stygia, living in Khemi until jealous Stygian wizard-priests poisoned him. With its last demon-tainted son dead, the direct lineage of the giant-kings concluded. The Age of Acheron was over.

Conan: Book of Thoth TPB cover art by Kelley Jones

THE HORRIFYING ORIGIN OF CONAN THE BARBARIAN'S GREATEST ADVERSARY!

In the dank alleys of a decaying city, one beggar boy conjures visions of a future in which the rich cower in fear of his terrible power! Witness the dreaded sorcerer Thoth-Amon's rise from the squalor of the streets through the priestly ranks of Ibis to the heights of evil! Plus: A look back into the barbarian's past! As warlord Khalar Zym sets out on a quest to find the mythical Mask of Acheron — an ancient artifact that will bring his beloved back to life — he thinks nothing of destroying a village in northern Cimmeria. But one boy born of battle survives Zym's attack — and years later, their paths are destined to cross once more!

Collecting *Conan: Book of Thoth* #1-4 and *Conan the Barbarian: The Mask of Acheron* — written by Kurt Busiek, Len Wein and Stuart Moore; and illustrated by Kelley Jones and Gabriel Guzman.

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